

**THE CURRENT NATURE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS  
PRACTITIONER ROLES IN BRAND ACTIVISM IN  
ORGANISATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

By

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## DECLARATION

I, Vicky-Lee Lee Shew, declare that the contents of this thesis represents my own unaided work, and that the thesis 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.

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism in organisations in South Africa. The researcher used Role Theory as a theoretical framework to answer the research question: “*What is the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism?*” The researcher adopted a qualitative approach for this study. Through this approach, the researcher was able to gauge practitioners’ understanding of brand activism in South African organisations, and the role (if any) undertaken by public relations practitioners in this activity. Some of the findings indicate that the participants enact several roles within their organisations, including the manager and technician role. The findings also show that organisations in South Africa are not engaging in brand activism as robustly as their American or European counterparts. Several of the participants, while displaying an understanding of brand activism, were of the opinion that public relations practitioners should have a role to play in brand activism, should their organisation participate therein.

Brand activism is an emerging corporate activity, and, as more organisations begin to participate in brand activism, a new role for public relations practitioners may emerge. It is recommended that further research be conducted to better understand the potential role that public relations practitioners could play in this function. This will empower public relations practitioners to manage the function effectively.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my loves, Dylan and Gopher.

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## **CHAPTER 1:**

### **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

In 2018, global athleisure brand, Nike, launched an advertisement to commemorate the 30th anniversary of their “Just Do It” campaign. The commemorative campaign featured controversial sportsman, Colin Kaepernick, who was at the time, under immense scrutiny for kneeling during the rendition of the United States national anthem at national football games. This demonstration, Kaepernick confirmed, was to protest what he said was the inordinate amount of violence levelled at African-American people in the United States. Some saw the act as unpatriotic and many levelled significant criticisms against the football player. Nike’s choice to use him in their campaign was daring, and to date, remains the most blatant act of brand activism. According to Manfredi-Sanchez (2019:334), there has been a significant corporate political shift where the goal of business is not to increase profits but rather to elicit social change by taking a stance on pivotal issues. Conflict no longer has exclusively negative connotations, but rather is viewed as a catalyst for change.

This study aims to investigate the current role of public relations practitioners in brand activism in organisations in South Africa. This study also aims to determine what the current expectations of public relations practitioners are regarding their role in brand activism, as well as how public relations practitioners are responding to brand activism in large organisations in South Africa. Through the lens of role theory, this study, which adopts a qualitative methodology, explores whether a new and pertinent role for public relations has emerged due to brand activism.

#### **1.2 Problem statement**

Historically, the function of public relations was to manage the conflict between the organisation and activist, however, with the emerging trend of brand activism, the public relations function is positioned to assume a new role by creating opportunities to encourage real social change. While research is extensive on traditional public relations practitioner roles, there is little research on what the nature of this ‘new’ emerging role is, considering the change in expectations, by stakeholders, for companies to lend their voice to pertinent social and political issues. There is also limited insight and guidance regarding the way this role is being

enacted and the methods being adopted to execute this role successfully. Limited guidance and insight can result in public relations practitioners being inadequately prepared to execute this function. Therefore, this study aims to determine the current nature of the role of the public relations practitioner in brand activism in large organisations.

### **1.3 Research objective**

The main objective of this study was to investigate the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism, in large organisations within South Africa. This study also aims to investigate the current expectations of public relations practitioners regarding their role in brand activism, and how they are responding to brand activism in organisations in South Africa.

#### **1.3.1 Research questions**

Following the problem highlighted above, the research questions explored include:

- What is the current nature of the public relations practitioner roles in brand activism?
- What are the current expectations of public relations practitioners regarding their role in brand activism?
- How are public relations practitioners responding to brand activism in large organisations?

#### **1.3.2 Research aims and objectives**

Based on the problem statement and research questions, the main objective of this study was to investigate the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism, in large organisations within South Africa.

Other objectives include:

- To investigate the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism
- To investigate the current expectations of public relations practitioners regarding their role in brand activism
- To explore how public relations practitioners are responding to brand activism in organisations in South Africa

### **1.4 Significance of the study**

This study aims to determine the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism, with a focus on organisations in South Africa. Research into this emerging field is limited. The researcher has noted that current research related to the subject is predominately

focused on organisations in the United States, with the most popular area of research relating to that of the marketing function and brand activism.

This study contributes to the public relations body of knowledge by identifying the roles that public relations practitioners play in brand activism, an area that has a paucity of research. Research into this area could also assist in identifying ways in which public relations practitioners can add value to their organisations by understanding the nature of brand activism and how it may be effective in organisations from a uniquely South African point of view.

### **1.5 Research design and methods**

For this study, the researcher utilised a qualitative approach to conduct the research. The researcher deems this approach suitable for the study, since the research aims to determine the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism. Qualitative research is less concerned with quantification and measurement of variables, but rather feelings, perceptions and experiences are described and narrated (Kumar, 2014). For this study, the thoughts, feelings, opinions and experiences of professional public relations practitioners were sought, through the form of in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

The researcher transcribed the audio files/recordings once the interviews had been conducted. Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to thematic analysis was then utilised to identify patterns across the data in relation to the participant's "experience, views, perspectives, behaviours and practice" (Braun and Clarke, 2015:1).

### **1.6 Theoretical framework**

While public relations has been established for decades, the profession is still seeking to secure its professional standing and motivate for its position among the dominant coalition, decision makers in an organisation. According to Hogg and Doolan (1997), determining how the public relations function is regarded, what actions practitioners take, and the amount of influence they have inside an organisation is critical in determining progress toward professional status for the public relations profession. One of the most studied areas of public relations is that of the role of the practitioner within the organisation (Pasadeos, Renfro and Hanily, in Ciszek, 2015). Since this study aims to determine the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism, the researcher identified role theory as the underpinning theoretical framework for this study. The most common idea in role theory is that

roles are associated with certain social positions or statuses (Biddle, 2013). Role theory is further discussed and unpacked in the literature review in chapter 2.

### **1.7 Delineation of the research**

This study focuses on the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism, and for this purpose, only public relations practitioners employed on a full-time basis in organisations in South Africa were considered for this study.

### **1.8 Chapter summary and outline of the thesis**

This chapter introduces and contextualises the research, which investigates the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism. The researcher addressed the study's problem statement, research aims, research questions, and importance in this chapter. The research design, methodologies, and theoretical framework on which this study is based were also mentioned.

The second chapter, Chapter 2, presents a synopsis of the literature studied in the areas of brand activism in organisations, as well as delves into role theory, which is the foundation of this research. In order to address the research question, Chapter 3 gives the reader an overview of the researcher's research strategy and techniques. In Chapter 4, the collected data is provided, along with a thematic analysis thereof, while in Chapter 5, the main results and recommendations for future research are outlined.

## **CHAPTER 2:**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the literature review and explores, amongst other things, the theoretical framework that was used for this study, role theory. The study of public relations roles has been an important area of research because it provides greater explanatory insight into the work behaviour of public relations practitioners (Piekos and Einsiedal, 1990:96). Role theory is concerned with the cues that guide and direct individual behaviour. People are seen as social actors when they pick up and use behaviours that are appropriate for the social roles they play (Hogg and Doolan, 1999:598). Roles can be defined as a “collection of everyday activities carried out by people” (Lattimore et al., in Sesen, 2015:138). Role theory is important to this study, as the study investigates the roles played by public relations practitioners in brand activism. Role theory is useful because it demonstrates how behaviours are often tied to the expectations of an audience, co-workers, and management (Carpenter and Lertpratchya 2016:450).

The literature review provides insight into the current roles occupied by public relations practitioners within organisations, to illustrate how public relations is being practised in organisations and to provide a foundation to understand the presumed role practitioners enact in brand activism.

The background and context to concepts like brand activism, corporate social responsibility, and the organisational environment are also discussed in this chapter. A grasp of brand activism, as it relates to public relations within an organisation, necessitates a better understanding of these principles

#### **2.2 An overview of how public relations has evolved in organisations**

According to Holtzhausen (2000:100), the public relations profession was born out of modernism and capitalism in the Western world. The profession, which was founded in the 1920s by Edward Bernays, has historically been utilised as a tool for organisational growth (Benedict, 2017). This is evident from the widely accepted definition, which states that public relations is a management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and diverse publics (Broom and Sha, 2013).

The goal of public relations, according to Seitel (2007), is to persuade diverse stakeholders and the general public to maintain a particular perspective on an organisation. Stakeholders are persons or groups who are impacted by or have the ability to influence an organisation's activities, policies, or goals (Freeman, in Gregory, 2012), whereas publics are established when stakeholders band together to rally around an issue that is important to them.

With much of its roots set in functionalist and modernist theories, the focus of public relations has been to serve the needs of business or state exclusively (Ciszek, 2015), where communication and the organisations' publics are utilised to achieve the organisations' goals. The functionalist approach to public relations sees organisations as being concerned ultimately with the bottom line (profit) and maintaining social order (Trujillo and Toth, 1987). Those adopting a functionalist perspective view the role of public relations as one that ensures all organisational communication remains harmonious and consistent with the corporate missions and objectives (Wood and Sommerville, 2012). A modernist approach to organisation communications "emphasises a management discourse and upper management's goals for the organisation as given and legitimate" (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002:58). Post-modernism, however, focuses on "dissensus rather than consensus and the joined nature of power and resistance" (Deetz, 2002:31, in Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002). The influence that history, culture, society, class and gender has on the individual is emphasised in post-modernism (Holtzhausen, 2000). Post-modern theorists challenge long-standing modern theories and approaches to the practice of public relations. When public relations is studied through the lens of post-modernism, it can help practitioners "understand their increasingly diverse society and come up with solutions to some of the problems they face" (Holtzhausen, 2000:95). It is clear that public relations has evolved from an organisational function, the focus of which was solely to serve the needs of management and the organisation, to one that is focused on the needs of external stakeholders, as well as the environment, in relation to the organisation. This insight into the evolution of the profession is important to understand the role that public relations practitioners could play in the growing phenomenon of brand activism.

In his research, James Grunig (1984) identified four models of public relations that were practised throughout history, namely the press agency/publicity model; the public information model; the two-way asymmetrical model and the two-way symmetrical model. The press agency model and the public information models are practised in organisations adopting a functionalist approach to public relations, as communication is primarily one way and used to

disseminate information from the organisation to its public. The two-way asymmetrical model involves the practitioners seeking information from, as well as, giving information to the public, with scientific persuasion as its goal (Laskin, 2009). The two-way symmetrical model, as identified by Grunig and Hunt (1984), includes “telling the truth, interpreting the client and public to one another and management understanding the viewpoints of employees and neighbours as well as employees and neighbours understanding the viewpoints of management” (Grunig and Grunig, 1992:289). The two-way symmetrical model of public relations is, according to Grunig, practised by excellent public relations practitioners/departments.

Due to advances in technology, globalisation and the rise of a more socially conscious consumer, businesses have realised that in order to maintain success, they must take into account more than just profits when making business decisions. Organisations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are held to a new and far higher set of standards than they have ever been. Consumers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are more environmentally conscious, politically engaged, and informed than previous generations, and they are not afraid to use their voice and wallets to express dissent with current social and political issues facing society. Because of this, consumers tend to support organisations (brands) that promote and support causes and issues affecting society, who are more socially responsible and act beyond their commercial interests (Shetty et al., 2019) The author believes that as the nature of business's involvement in society evolves, so does the role of public relations and the role it plays within organisations.

### **2.3 Role theory**

Role theory is significant in this study as it provides a theoretical overview to explain and understand the roles public relations practitioners enact in organisations. Additionally, role theory might be useful in identifying a new and emerging role for public relations practitioners through brand activism. According to Biddle (2013), the most common idea in role theory is that roles are associated with certain social positions or statuses. Hogg and Doolan (1999) theorise that role theory is also concerned with the signals that influence a person's behaviour in a social setting, and that the expectations of others are at the centre of contemporary role theory. Role theorists disagree about the motivation behind expectations. Some assume that expectations are norms, others see them as being a belief and there is the view that expectations are just preferences or attitudes (Biddle, 1986). According to Hechter and Opp (2001:10), norms are cultural phenomena that prescribe behaviour in specific circumstances and are responsible for regulating social behaviour. Belief is defined as a “state or habit of



mind in which trust or confidence is placed in some person or thing” (Merriam-Webster dictionary 2022, sv ‘belief’), while attitude or preference is described as “somewhere between a belief, a stance, a mood and a pose” (vocabulary, 2022).

Regardless of the motivation, people assume roles because of expectations, as Biddle (1986:5) states “those who exhibit the role are stimulated to do so because they learn what behaviours are expected of them, while others are stimulated through their own expectations to teach and enforce appropriate behaviours”.

Hogg and Doolan (1999) argue that most research conducted on role theory in an organisational context, assumes that the individual decides how they are going to enact a certain role. Research, however, suggests that the role enacted by public relations practitioners in an organisational setting are “inherently derived from perceptions of what constitutes public relations” (Hogg and Doolan, 1999:599). The behaviour associated with a given position, the environmental pressures that will activate that role, and the patterned traits of people occupying that role are more important to role theory than the conduct of specific individuals (Whelan, 2014). When a brand uses its influence and power to make a statement about political, environmental or social issues, it does so by utilising various kinds of public relations and marketing functions like messaging and advertising, often through social media or other channels. The researcher has found that a significant amount of research into brand activism, falls within the marketing sector, even though public relations tools and functions are used to enact the brand activism. Role theory will assist the researcher to reveal whether the public relations practitioner plays a role in brand activism in organisations in South Africa.

### **2.3.1 Perspectives on role theory**

Role theory has evolved because of parallel and generally segregated development of role-related words, propositions and theories across disciplines (Whelan, 2014). While most of this study draws from concepts related to organisational role theory, the researcher provides an overview of the various other perspectives in role theory, namely, functional; symbolic interactionist; structural; organisational; cognitive role theory and gender role theory.

#### **2.3.1.1 *Functionalist role theory***

According to Biddle (1986), functional role theory concentrates on the behaviours of people who hold social roles in a stable social system. Roles, in this perspective, are shared and normative, and individuals in this system are likely to have been instructed on how to behave

and ensure that others in the system adhere to the norms. Role theory in this perspective characterises the components of a stable social system, why they are stable and how they promote participant conformity.

### **2.3.1.2 Symbolic interactionist role theory**

In this perspective, social interaction and numerous cognitive notions through which social actors understand and interpret their own and others' actions are highlighted (Biddle, 1986). Symbolic interactionism is a sociological framework that analyses how societies are formed and maintained via an individuals' repetition of meaningful activities, people in society perceive their social surroundings through communication, which is defined as the interchange of meaning via language and symbols (Carter and Fuller, 2015).

### **2.3.1.3 Structural role theory**

According to Biddle (1986), structural role theory is concerned less with the individuals and their perceived roles, and more about the environment that these individuals inhabit. Attention is given to social structures, a stable organisation of sets of persons that share the same sets of patterns behaviours (roles) that are directed towards other sets of persons in the structure. Our concept of the structure of the system is that of a complement of positions, rather than a complement of persons. Structural positions are filled by public assignment and the reason for this within a social structure is that all concerned understand the transitory natures of positional membership in such situations (e.g. players in a baseball game occupying different positions) (Biddle, 1979:101).

### **2.3.1.4 Organisational role theory**

The central tenet of organisational role theory is that employees within an organisation are required to enact certain roles to perform essential tasks effectively and efficiently (Katz and Khan, 1978, in Wickham and Parker, 2007). This theory is focused on "social systems that are pre-planned, task orientated and hierarchical" (Biddle, 1986:73). Roles in such organisations are thought to be related with recognised social positions and formed by normative expectations, but norms can vary among individuals and reflect both organisational demands and informal group influences. Individuals are frequently faced with role conflicts because of many sources of norms, in which they must contend with opposing rules for their behaviour. Such role conflicts cause pressure and must be handled for the individual's happiness and the organisation's success (Biddle, 1986).

### **2.3.1.5 Cognitive role theory**

The focus of this work is on the relationship that exists between role expectations and role behaviour. The social factors that influence expectations, methods for evaluating expectations, and how expectations affect social behaviour are the focus of cognitive role theory. Additionally, it is focused on how someone interprets others' expectations and how that interpretation affects their behaviour (Biddle 1986:74). It is concerned with the underlying process by which perceptions, cognitions and behaviours are influenced by roles (Whelan, 2014).

## **2.4 Public relations practitioner roles**

Given the above, roles enacted by certain members of society or of an organisation, can be viewed through various lenses or perspectives. One of the most studied areas of public relations is that of the role of practitioners within the organisation (Pasadeos, Renfro and Hanily, in Ciszek, 2015). The research of roles in public relations is concerned with identifying a place for public relations practitioners within an organisation (Hogg and Doolan, 1999). In this study, the idea of role as it relates to public relations practitioners refers to the day-to-day actions that these individuals perform inside an organisation. Roles research has been pivotal to the public relations profession as it provides insight into the activities carried out by public relations practitioners, beyond the common duties, such as writing press releases and acting as a media liaison (Toth, Serini, Wright and Emig, 1998).

According to research conducted by Broom and Smith (1978,1979), a public relations practitioner's office entails a wide range of tasks or duties. However, via individual preference, training and in reaction to others' expectations and environmental restrictions, they form a dominating pattern of job-related behaviours (Piekos and Einsiedel,1990). Four roles of public relations practitioners were conceptualised by Broom and Smith (1978, 1979), namely the expert prescriber, the communication facilitator, the problem-solving process facilitator, and the communication technician (Steyn and Everett, 2009:105). The four roles mentioned here were subsequently reduced to two roles, namely the public relations manager, which incorporated the expert prescriber, communication facilitator and problem-solving process facilitator, and the public relations communication technician (Hogg and Doolan, 1999).

The communication technician is more of a creative or artistic role and includes, among other activities, writing and editing and the implementation of communication programmes. Practitioners occupying the technician role, do not take part in any managerial decision making nor do they conduct research related to their work. The decisions are made by the dominant coalition, and the public relations technician is tasked with utilising their communication and journalistic skills to carry out communication programmes (Steyn and Puth, 2000). The public relations manager is responsible for communication policy decisions and using “research to plan or evaluate work and to counsel management” (Steyn and Everett, 2009:105). Practitioners in the managerial role are ultimately responsible for communication programmes and facilitating communication and managing relationships between the organisation and its public (Steyn and Everett, 2009), these include activist publics.

A third role was conceptualised by Steyn (in Steyn and Everett, 2009), namely, that of public relations strategist, which is carried out by the most senior public relations practitioners. The responsibility of the public relations strategist involves the constant monitoring (boundary spanning) of the organisational environment for any issues that might arise that might affect the organisation and its policies and strategies (Steyn and Everett, 2009). The public relations strategist will develop and implement certain plans and strategies to enable the organisation to adapt, adjust and respond to any changes in the environment. They also manage relationships with internal and external stakeholders to find the balance between the internal and external environments (Ciszek, 2015).

The public relations manager, as a strategist, constantly monitors and gathers information about any issues or opportunities in the organisational environment and feeds this information back to the organisation so that it can be used to develop strategic plans and aid strategic management. The public relations manager performing this function is positioned to identify activist publics threatening to form against the organisation and will subsequently, take measures to manage these publics in such a way so as not to deter the organisation from its goals and objectives.

The public relations practitioner in this role is also poised to identify opportunities for the organisation to participate in brand activists' events that align with the organisation's vision, mission and values. Lesly (1973) in Newsom, Turk and Kruckeberg (2010:17) regards public relations as a “bridge to change”. Public relations plays a role in facilitating change within an

organisation, assisting employees to adjust to change and fostering new attitudes to create change (Lesly, in Newsom, et al., 2010).

The next section sheds more light on the organisational environment as a major factor that impacts organisational strategy, structure, performance and the role played by public relations practitioners.

## **2.5 The organisational environment and its impact on organisational strategy, structure, performance and the role played by public relations practitioners**

No other factor affects organisational strategy, structure and performance more than the organisational environment (Steyn and Puth, 2000). In the systems theory approach, organisations are viewed as social systems that must interact with their environments to survive (Davis, 2007). The organisational environment refers to forces internal and external to the organisation that can influence an organisation's activities, decisions and performance. Forces in the internal environment consist of, amongst others, employee attitudes and behaviour and organisational culture, while forces in the external environment consist of economic, social and political factors, customers, suppliers and competitors (Robbins 1987, in Grunig 1992), defined the external environment as forces that affect the organisation, but over which the organisation has no control. Activist groups have historically been classified as a force occurring in the organisations' external environment.

Sesen (2015) suggests that systems theory also provides a way of thinking about relationships in organisations. Systems theory explains that the organisation is made up of interrelated parts that adapt and adjust to changes in the political, economic and social environments in which it operates (Lattimore et al., in Sesen, 2015). Furthermore, Ciszek (2015) states that the systems theory sees organisations as organic entities that are dynamic in their engagement with their environments. In systems theory, the role of public relations is to maintain a harmonious balance between the organisation and its public. It sees the organisation as a social system and public relations as one of its sub-systems (Sesen, 2015). The role the public relations practitioner enacts is dependent upon the perspective from which it is viewed.

From a social perspective, the role of public relations is defined by the social system, whereas organisations' perspectives define the role according to how public relations can help the organisation achieve its goals (Sesen, 2015). Acharya (1983), in Hogg and Doolan (1999:599) found that there is a direct correlation between the role the public relations practitioner enacted and the organisational environment, that is, public relations practitioners enabling the technician role were found in organisations with less threatening environments, whereas those fulfilling the managerial role were found in organisations with more volatile environments. The role the practitioner enacts is therefore determined by the organisation and the environment it inhabits.

Not only are practitioners' roles influenced by the environment, but so too are the organisations' activities, because organisations exist with society's authorisation, they must serve society responsibly (Bowen, 2008). Organisations have increasingly become obligated to pay attention to what the environment finds acceptable (Ihlen and Verhoevan, 2015 in Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015), and are constantly striving to maintain legitimacy. As a result, corporate social responsibility has become the driving force behind organisations striving for legitimacy, and to maintain the right to exist, they carefully balance the demands of the environment with the goals of the organisation.

The following section discusses corporate social responsibility and how it relates to brand activism.

## **2.6 Corporate social responsibility**

Corporate social responsibility is by no means a new concept. It is one that dates back virtually to the French revolution, at least to Joseph Roundtree's corporate charity in the region of his chocolate factories, which offered shelter and education to the needy (Frankental, 2001). Corporate social responsibility is values driven (Sarkar and Kotler, 2020). It is an organisation's way to balance the demands between the environment and the organisation by considering the economic, social and political impact its operations will have on the environment (Theaker, 2012).

Corporate social responsibility is not an optional extra but rather forms an integral part of business operations (Theaker, 2012). Organisations operating in South Africa are guided by the King reports. First issued in 1994, these reports, drafted by the King Committee on

Corporate Governance, provide organisations with acceptable standards of practice and encourage good governance practices while emphasising that corporations should be socially responsible towards the communities in which they operate (Flores-Arous, 2021). CSR campaigns by South African companies include SAB Miller, whose sustainable development priorities include waste reduction, HIV/AIDS awareness, responsible drinking and renewable energy, to name a few (SAB,2022). The management and implementation of CSR programmes in organisations has always fallen within the ambit of the public relations function.

It has often been said that the public relations practitioner must act as the conscience of the organisation or “moral agents in society” (Cutlip 1995, in Theaker, 2012). However, the profession has suffered from a poor reputation and image caused by its earliest practitioners who had little care for ethics or social responsibility (Brunner, 2017). The ethical conscience of an organisation should be that part that seeks long terms efficacy and endeavours to build lasting relationships with the publics and stakeholders (Bowen, 2008).

Public relations is primarily a communication function, and all development and social change is dependent on communication, therefore, the public relations practitioner, through CSR programmes, works as an agent for change in society (Skinner and Merham, 2008). Public relations and CSR are not separate entities but are interconnected so that CSR becomes a tool for public relations (L’Etang, 1994). The public relations practitioner, fulfilling the strategist role, constantly scans and monitors the environment for any issues or developments in the environment that could have an impact on the organisation, which are reported directly to top management and help to influence organisational policy and operations.

The world is changing, and with it, myriad environmental, social and political issues are causing individuals to gather together to rally for change through activism initiatives. Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives enacted by organisations are no longer enough to address these issues (Sarkar and Kotler, 2020), but rather a new role for business in society has evolved: the organisation as an activist. Sarkar and Kotler (2020) identify activism as a natural progression from CSR and suggest that businesses must now act as agents of change. However, what sets brand activism apart from CSR is its contentious nature, since the latter is concerned with pro-social, non-divisive issues such as education or disaster relief

(Murkherjee and Althuizen, 2020). The following section further discusses the concept of brand activism.

## **2.7 Brand activism**

As shown in the previous discussion, organisations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are held to a new and much higher set of standards than they have ever been subjected to before. Organisations in the industrial age were only concerned with their shareholders' interest and producing a profit (the bottom line), however there is a new business paradigm. According to Steyn and Nieman (2010), the new business paradigm is characterised by a triple bottom line approach to sustainability, that is considering the economic, social and environmental factors that influence an organisation. Societal and stakeholder expectations, good governance and ethical behaviour are increasingly becoming more important than the law in regulating organisations (Steyn and Niemann, 2010).

Due to this focus on the triple bottom line approach to sustainability, the current organisational landscape is witnessing a massive transfer in power from the organisation to the consumer. Brand names distinguish one product, service provider or manufacturer from another by identifying, labelling or symbolising abstract values such as quality, status or reputation (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006). People purchase things and brands for reasons other than their physical characteristics and functions (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990; Muniz and O'guinn, 2001). According to Kotler and Sarkar (2017), a new phenomenon known as "brand activism" has emerged in the marketing and advertising world, in which firms and brands get into activist mode and openly voice their opinions about a subject or issue.

In recent years, social justice movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, have acquired tremendous traction around the world, thanks in part to the widespread use of social media, as well as the support of major brands and companies. The most prolific example of a big-name brand lending its voice to a social/political cause is that of the athletics brand, Nike, and its unwavering support for American football player, Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick chose to sit during the playing of the American national anthem to demonstrate his support and solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement, claiming that he was bringing awareness for the injustice levelled at people of colour and the on-going problem of police brutality. He soon had other players, especially those of colour, following suit which led to the call from then



President Trump, for the National Football League (NFL) to “fire” all protesting players (Intravia et al., 2020).

In 2018, Nike created an advertisement featuring the NFL player to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their “Just Do It” campaign. “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything”. The advertisements generated immediate outrage, with some vowing to boycott Nike products and others publicly destroying/burning their Nike gear in protest to Colin Kaepernick's appearance in the commercial campaign (Intravia et al., 2020; Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019).



**Figure 1: Nike Campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick**

Activism of this kind however is not out of character for the athleisure brand. Nike produced the first “female empowerment” campaign, positioning sports as a path to empowerment for girls and women, long before it was fashionable (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Nike has consistently shown their support for social issues through their advertising campaigns and business practices. The brand has never been unwilling to sacrifice a segment of its consumer base in order to appeal to the majority, as evidenced by the 3% decline in its stock price on the day it unveiled the Kaepernick campaign (Gupta, 2020).

Aronson and Kato (2021) claim that even if the company's stated position is consistent with what customers anticipate, the risk remains that customers will be sceptical of this type of activity. When brands combine activist messages, purpose, and values with prosocial corporate activity, they engage in genuine brand activism, which has the greatest potential for social change and brand equity gains (Vredenburg, et al., 2020). Inauthentic brand activism, or "woke-washing" takes place when brands engage in activist activities that do not align with their business practices. Organisations may be weakening or denigrating the causes they claim to promote by exploiting injustice for commercial gain (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019). Soft drink company Pepsi, for example, launched a campaign in 2017, "Live for Now", featuring Kendall Jenner of the infamous Kardashian family. Jenner was shown ending a demonstration with a can of Pepsi in the commercial, which was inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement. This is considered "woke washing" because the commercial had no marketing purpose, value, or connection to the Black Lives Matter movement (Aronson and Kato, 2021).



**Figure 2: Pepsi Commercial featuring Kendal Jenner ([www.dailymail.co.uk](http://www.dailymail.co.uk))**

The brand received such widespread criticism and backlash from consumers, that they removed the advertisement completely 24 hours after airing. Users, including the daughter of civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr, took to Twitter to express their dissatisfaction in very tongue-in-cheek ways, juxtaposing the Pepsi advertisement with images of real civil rights demonstrations (Fordyce, 2018).



**Figure 3: Tweets criticising the Pepsi campaign**

Brands that engage in "woke-washing" risk not only jeopardising the social causes they profess to support, but also jeopardising their reputation and brand image. As a result, brands must understand the potential consequences of participation in social activism. Brand activism is a new and developing research area. The Marketing Science Institute listed whether brands should take such views as one of the crucial concerns developing in the not-too-distant marketing future in 2016, emphasising that managers would need to know whether courting controversy will benefit or hinder their brand (Mukherjee and Althuisen, 2020). It is the opinion of the author that public relations practitioners possess the skills, training and experience to help guide brands through the precarious waters of brand activism.

Brand activism currently has a small body of literature with much of it centred around the field of marketing and advertising. Given that brand activism has a direct impact on an organisation's reputation and image, both of which are critical to the public relations sector, research on brand activism as it relates to public relations is scarce. The research set forth in

this paper, aims to expand the body of knowledge of brand activism to include the role that public relations can play in the organisational activity.

## **2.8 Chapter summary**

The literature review in this chapter introduced the reader to the theoretical framework on which this study was based, namely, role theory. The researcher explained why role theory is important in this study and gave an overview of the different viewpoints from which it might be observed. This literature review also provided an awareness and background of the roles public relations practitioners enact in organisations. As previously stated, this is an area in public relations that has received a great deal of attention from researchers. Background information on the responsibilities that public relations practitioners presently play provides context and a framework for answering the study question.

It is crucial to consider the organisational environment regarding the roles that public relations practitioners play, as the literature review has highlighted how the former has a direct influence on these roles. Lastly, the researcher introduced the reader to the concepts of corporate social responsibility and brand activism and highlighted how these concepts relate to each other.

The next chapter focuses on the research methodology for this study. The chosen methodological design, research approach, data analysis and sampling processes is outlined. In addition to using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis process, the researcher also employed Bree and Gallaghers (2016) method for generating codes using Microsoft Excel.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This chapter outlines the research methodology of this study. The researcher used an abductive approach and was guided by role theory to (1) determine the current nature of the roles of public relations practitioners in brand activism in South Africa, (2) to determine the current expectations of public relations practitioners regarding their role in brand activism, and (3) to gauge how public relations practitioners are responding to brand activism in large organisations. The following sections provide further details about the research design and data analysis process.

#### **3.1 Research approach**

Research is a process by which an answer to a particular question or a solution to a problem is discovered through the collection, analysis, and interpretation of information (Kumar, 2014). In social research, there are three modes of enquiry or approaches that are generally used to find answers to research questions, namely, the quantitative or structured approach; the qualitative or unstructured approach and the mixed method approach. According to Kumar (2014), quantitative research follows procedures that are structured and predetermined, with an emphasis on measurement and the quantification of phenomenon. Qualitative research is concerned with meaning, specifically, meaning assigned to social or human problems by individuals or groups (Creswell, 2014). Its purpose is to describe a situation, phenomenon or event and follows an “open, flexible and unstructured approach to enquiry” (Kumar, 2014:14). A mixed method approach is a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

For this study, the researcher utilised the qualitative approach to conduct research. The researcher believes this approach is suitable to the study as qualitative research is less concerned with quantification and measurement and more focused on the “description and narration of feelings, perceptions and experiences” (Kumar, 2014:132).

Findings, according to Kumar (2014), are also communicated in a descriptive, narrative matter. Since the aim of the research is to determine the current nature of public relations practitioner

roles in brand activism, the thoughts, feelings, opinions and experiences of professional public relations practitioners was sought, and this is best done using the unstructured approach determined by a qualitative research method.

### **3.2 Research paradigm**

This research was conducted by using an interpretivist paradigm and an abductive research approach. A paradigm can be described as a set of beliefs one holds about the world around them. In research, a paradigm governs the way in which we ask research questions and how research is conducted (Davies and Fisher, 2018). A research paradigm reflects the researcher's beliefs about the world in which s/he lives and in which s/he wants to live (Lather, 1986, in Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017:26).

The aim of the interpretivist paradigm is to understand and interpret what the subject is thinking or the meaning they are making of the context (Tubey, et al., 2015). The researcher had to interview, gather and interpret data obtained from semi-structured interviews with a selected sample group of public relations practitioners. This paradigm views reality as being different from individual to individual and does not accept the concept of a single reality (Davies and Fisher, 2019:23). Emphasis is placed on the individual, their experiences and interpretation of the world around them, reality is believed to be socially constructed (Bogden and Biklen, 1998, in Tubey, et al., 2015).

### **3.3 Sampling**

Sampling is the process of selecting who or what would best help to answer the research questions (du-Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout, 2014). Sampling techniques include probability and non-probability sampling. Bhattacharjee (2012) states that probability sampling can be utilised when every person within a chosen population has the potential to be selected as a sample. Expert sampling, a type of non-probability sampling technique is "where respondents are chosen in a non-random manner based on their expertise on the phenomenon being studied" (Bhattacharjee, 2012:69). This sample process is deemed suitable for this study as this method will elicit the best information to achieve the objectives of this study. Due to the nature of public relations in South Africa and the need to understand the role of public relations practitioners in brand activism, within a South African context, participants were carefully chosen, based on their employment status as full time in-house public relations practitioners and their understanding of public relations roles and the concept

of brand activism and the potential role public relations practitioners play in organisations brand activism. No other criteria such as age, sex, gender or years of work experience were pertinent to this study.

### **3.4 Sample size**

Being able to calculate sample size for qualitative research is not as straight forward and as deterministic as for quantitative research. Traditionally, qualitative researchers tend to collect data until they feel that a saturation point has been reached, i.e. no new data is forthcoming from research participants. Tran, Porcher, Tran and Ravaud (2016) state that saturation point is based on the researcher's own judgement and experience. In their research Guest, Namey and Chen (2020) have attempted to provide researchers with a more scientific process for calculating data saturation and to answer the question, how many interviews is enough in qualitative research? Based on their findings, Guest et al. (2020) conclude that 6-7 interviews are often enough to capture most of the themes from a sample population. These findings are consistent with empirical research conducted in the early 2000s that found that most of the new information is gathered from the first 5-6 interview participants (Guest et al., 2020). Based on this, the researcher collected interview from six public relations practitioners employed on a full-time basis at organisations based in South Africa. The researcher found that six participants were enough for this study, as the researcher believed that a saturation point had been reached after five participants.

### **3.5 Participant demographics**

The following is an outline of the participants demographics. The table shows that participants in this study have varying years of service in the field, ranging from six years to 30. Three of the six participants hold a senior position within their respective organisations.

**Table 1: Sample population**

| Participants | Gender | Years of Service | Level  | Sector  |
|--------------|--------|------------------|--------|---------|
| 1            | M      | 30               | Senior | Public  |
| 2            | F      | 11               | Junior | Private |
| 3            | F      | 6                | Senior | Private |
| 4            | M      | 16               | Senior | Public  |
| 5            | M      | 7                | Junior | Public  |
| 6            | F      | 15               | Senior | Private |

### **3.6 Data collection**

Data collection includes designing the research instrument, i.e., the questionnaire, participant recruitment, collecting data and making inductive inferences (Hennink et al., 2020:89).

Richards and Morse (2013) suggest that the method used will determine the form of data created. Interviews are a data collection method commonly found in qualitative research studies. Interviews allow for interpretation and understanding of the meaning of participants' answers to specific questions (du-Plooy Cilliers, et al., 2014).

For this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected participants as part of the data collection process. The researcher went about enlisting respondents for the interviews, by requesting participation from suitable persons within the researcher's immediate network of professional colleagues. The researcher also utilised the social media platform, LinkedIn, to reach out to prospective participants that matched the criteria for the study. Of the ten emails that were sent to prospective participants via this platform, only one response was received. The researcher searched websites of large organisations to find the in-house public relations practitioners, four practitioners were emailed but no response was received from any of them. The six participants eventually chosen for the study were all referred to the researcher by peers in their professional network.

Interviews were conducted electronically, via the Microsoft Teams platform. Due to the recent Covid-19 pandemic, and the fact that some participants were not in the same geographical location as the researcher, all interviews were recorded using the built-in record function on



the Microsoft Teams application. Express permission was sought from each participant to allow for the recording. Thereafter, the interviews were transcribed, using the transcribe function in Microsoft Word via Microsoft SharePoint. Qualitative interviews, according to Creswell (2014:190), consist of a few unstructured or open-ended questions, that are designed to extract the views and opinions from participants. Each interview lasted between 45 – 60 minutes. The interview questions are outlined in Appendix A.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

Order and structured meaning was sorted from a mass of data, through data analysis (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport, in du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The researcher, with the help of Microsoft SharePoint's word function, transcribed all the interviews directly from the recorded interviews. To be able to code the data and determine themes that emerged, the researcher utilised Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used to identify patterns across data in relation to participants' "experience, views, perspectives, behaviours and practice" (Braun and Clarke, 2015:2). Braun and Clarke (2012:58) draw distinctions between three main "continua along which qualitative research can be located" namely deductive versus inductive coding and analysis, experiential versus critical orientation to data, and essentialist versus constructionist theoretical perspective. An inductive approach is driven by what is in the data, whereas a deductive approach is driven by what concepts, ideas or topics the researcher brings to the data (Braun and Clark, 2012). A third approach namely abductive reasoning, begins with the data and subsequently moves towards hypothesis formation (Charmaz, 2006). For this study, the researcher used an abductive approach to examining the data. The researcher was guided by the concepts in role theory to allocate codes and determine themes.

The first phase in Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase approach to thematic analysis is to become familiar with the data. This step involves the researcher fully immersing themselves in the data, i.e., audio files, transcripts, etc. Thereafter, phase two involves generating initial codes; these can be a summary of a portion of the data or provide an in-depth interpretation about the content of the data. "Codes are succinct and work as shorthand for something you, the analyst understands, they do not have to be fully worked up explanations" (Braun and Clarke, 2012:61). Phase three, searching for themes, is where the researcher will inevitably "capture something important about the data in relation to the research question" (Braun and Clark, 2012:63). Thereafter, phase four, reviewing potential themes is, according to Braun and Clark (2012:65), essentially a quality checking step where "developing themes are reviewed

in relation to the coded data and the entire data set". Defining and naming themes, phase five, includes deeper analytic work and finding what is unique and specific about each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2012) followed by phase six which is concerned with producing the report.

The researcher utilised Bree and Gallagher's (2016) method for generating initial codes using Microsoft Excel. These codes were simultaneously generated using the transcribed notes, while the researcher listened to the recorded interviews to verify the transcriptions. Bree and Gallagher developed a simple, cost-effective method for sorting large amounts of data, using colour coding and sorting techniques via Microsoft Excel.

### **3.8 Chapter summary**

The methodology utilised in this study, allowed the researcher to gain valuable insights into the current nature of the roles of public relations practitioners in brand activism at organisations within South Africa. Interviews conducted with a small sample size, via Microsoft Teams, allowed for the researcher to gauge interviewees' experience and understanding of brand activism as it relates to the public relations function.

The following chapter outlines the analysis and findings based on the interviews conducted. The chapter also outlines Braun and Clarke's six-step process for thematic analysis. A discussion on the findings is presented.

## **CHAPTER 4:**

### **ANALYSIS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter presents the findings of research conducted to answer the research question: “*What is the current nature of the role of public relations practitioners in brand activism in South Africa?*” The researcher aimed to gauge participants’ understanding of the concept of brand activism, whether organisations in South Africa are participating in brand activism, and if so, to what extent.

#### **4.1 Analysis**

Braun and Clarke’s six-step process for thematic analysis was utilised in order to decipher the data to answer the research question, “what is the current nature of the role of public relations practitioners in brand activism in South Africa?” The six-step process includes the following:

- Familiarisation
- Generating initial codes
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing potential themes
- Defining and naming themes
- Write-up

##### **4.1.1 Familiarisation**

In order to become completely familiar with the data, the researcher read each transcribed interview in conjunction with listening to the audio file in order to ensure that the interview was correctly transcribed and accurate. Corrections were made where necessary and initial handwritten notes were made during this step.

##### **4.1.2 Generating initial codes**

After the researcher was satisfied that the transcripts were accurate, Bree and Gallagher’s (2016) approach using Microsoft Excel was used to initiate initial codes. Responses that the researcher deemed relevant and important from the interviews were tabled in Excel, and initial

codes were identified, as can be seen in the table below. The table includes interview extracts (in italics) as well as initial codes extracted.

**Table 2: Interview extracts**

| Interview extracts based on each interview question   | Initial codes   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Position respondent occupies in the organisations</b></p> <p>There's a convergence of different things into one job, described elements of marketing, public relations and communication. Is a member of executive management.</p> <p>Communication specialist- duties include writing and curating 3 newsletters, social media planning and post production</p> <p>Manager corporate communications, manage information that is disseminated, reputation management, stakeholder management</p> <p>Management communication and marketing, stakeholder relations, marketing, event management, editing, writing, brand management, reputation management, crisis management, crisis communication, boundary spanning</p> | <p>Convergence of roles</p> <p>Manager role</p> <p>Technician role</p> <p>Reputation management</p> <p>Stakeholder management</p> <p>Boundary spanning</p>              |
| <p><b>Expressing dissent</b></p> <p>Lack of tenure a deterrent when considering expressing dissent</p> <p>Shareholders "<i>Rich white males</i>" still have a say in what is going on, their say is final, that is the nature of the organisation</p> <p>When you have planned for things, you can influence, however when reacting to something in the moment, all you can do is give advice, decision makers will either take it or leave it</p>  | <p>Company culture dictates environment</p> <p>Comfort expressing views</p> <p>Planned vs. unplanned occurrences</p> <p>Type of industry e.g. knowledge environment</p> |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>Nature of the environment i.e. knowledge environment, everyone must put their position forward and ultimately try to reach consensus.</p> <p>Organisation provides opportunities to discuss issues, even anonymously</p> <p>Organisation promotes culture of open communication</p>   |  |
| <p><b>Why brand activism now?</b></p> <p>A company will never do something like that if they don't see the possibility to maybe get something positive out of it</p> <p>Possible reputational damage if issues are not addressed, show what they stand for in terms of values and guided by their policies, <i>we are not going to get involved in a campaign if it doesn't fit with our profile</i>, aligning cause to business goals</p> <p>Consumers are smart, consumers are demanding socially responsible brands</p> <p>Led by consumer demands and consumers wanting to be associated with certain brands</p> <p>Two pronged, organisations engage in brand activism to show that they stand for a cause, but ultimately it is for profit margins</p> <p>Brand had a social responsibility towards the communities they inhabit</p> <p>Activism must be aligned to your companies' mission, vision and values</p> | <p>Consumer demands</p> <p>Brand responsibility to their consumers and environment</p> <p>Alignment between cause and company values</p> <p>Social responsibility</p> <p>Scepticism related to motive behind brand activism</p> <p>Social responsibility with benefits</p> |
| <p><b>Involvement in brand activism</b></p> <p>On some level, organisation has been involved but not overtly</p>   | <p>Confusion between brand activism and corporate social responsibility</p>  |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>Initiative described could fall within CSR ambit</p> <p>One respondent's organisation campaigned for an end to violence against women</p>   | <p>Not prevalent in South Africa as yet</p> <p>Few examples of BA in South Africa</p>   |
| <p><b>Opinion on previous BA campaigns i.e. Nike #BlackLivesMatter and Joko #EndDomesticSilence</b></p> <p>From where does the decision to take a stand for a social issue emanate?</p> <p>Because of the brand identity (Nike) the activism was not out of place</p> <p>Return on investment is bigger for them – motivated by profit</p> <p>It is good for brand to associate with a particular cause, especially when it is aligned with the core values of that particular organisation then it benefits the brand as well as the cause</p> <p>Progressive, not out of character for the brand</p> | <p>Who makes the decision?</p> <p>Brand values must align to cause</p> <p>Motivated by profit</p> <p>Scepticism</p> <p>Integrity and Authenticity in brand activism important</p> |
| <p><b>Organisational participation in CSR</b></p> <p>Each respondent mentioned a form of CSR activity</p> <p>King IV organisations are mandated to participate in CSR activities</p> <p>Respondents not directly involved in CSR activities, but function is management or housed within the corporate communication / corporate affairs function</p>  | <p>CSR mandatory in South Africa</p> <p>Management by separate function in the communication sphere</p>   |
| <p><b>Difference between CSR and BA</b></p> <p>CSR is done with an ulterior motive, Activism must come from the heart, have ulterior motives could actually harm the cause</p>   | <p>CSR is mandatory, BA is not</p> <p>Strategic intent</p>  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>They are both strategic, there's a reason why we choose to do the things we are doing</p> <p>I do think there is a difference, I think they overlap in execution; Advocacy is the position, CSI is the vehicle</p> <p>There is a difference - CSI is plowing back into the community, BA is making your voice known and your position on an issue known</p> <p>CSR is mandatory, you have a social responsibility, BA is not</p> <p>If we as an organisation want to decide to voice our opinion on a particular social issue, at the back of our minds there's something we want to gain</p>   | <p>Where is the pay-off for brand activism?</p> <p>CSR guided by King IV principles</p> <p>CSR included activities for the community, BA is expressing an opinion<br/>(taking a stand on an issue)</p>   |
| <p><b>PRP's as conscience of the organisation</b></p> <p>PR practitioners should play that role, but they are not the alpha and the omega</p> <p>It is a huge responsibility, our job is to serve both the organisation and the audience</p> <p>The PR department is there to provide continuity to these programmes and to continuously remind stakeholders of the cause</p> <p>PR plays a boundary spanner role and should advise management on messages that are seen in the organisation's community</p> <p>It is the ideal, but it is difficult because of company culture</p> <p>We're not always treated as experts and our opinions are not always valued. It is what we're obligated to do, but if your CEO says you must do something you're going to do it because that is what you're paid to do</p> | <p>Huge responsibility</p> <p>Boundary spanner role</p> <p>Provide advice to management</p> <p>Constant messaging to remind stakeholders of campaign</p> <p>Ruled by dominant coalition, CEO has final say</p> <p>Reluctance to assume this responsibility</p> |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>PR at the forefront of change</b></p> <p>Communication people should have their finger on the pulse of their community<br/>(Boundary spanner)</p> <p>Whoever has the power to influence in the organisation should be the agent of change, not necessarily the PR person</p> <p>I think I am a go-to person and I am also believing that the PR unit or practitioner should be at the forefront of change</p> <p>The group manager for communication has a seat on the executive management panel, this shows that the communication function is highly valued, and that communication is an integral part of business</p>  | <p>Should know what is happening in the environment</p> <p>Advise management</p> <p>Communication is an executive function, taken seriously</p>   |
| <p><b>Where should management of brand activism lie?</b></p> <p>Should be with PR the moment you put that with Marketing it becomes about money. If BA lies in the marketing sphere, then it does not come across as authentic</p> <p>It should cut across the business, we all should be responsible for brand activism, but if you're looking for accountability then I would say it sits with corporate communication</p> <p>Comments and queries emanating from messages sent out to external audiences about BA will be directed at the PR/Communication department and not any other department in the organisation. PR is the point of entry from outside and is the point of exit to communicate with external communities</p> <p>Must be strategic, planned and deliberate</p> | <p>PR department responsible for stakeholder communication</p> <p>Should be everyone's responsibility</p> <p>BA should be planned, strategic and deliberate</p> <p>It should sit with comms as they are the custodians of the organisation's brand and reputation</p> |



### 4.1.3 Searching for themes

A theme represents something vital about the data, in relation to the research question and highlights some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun and Clark, 2006, in Braun and Clark 2012:63).

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism in South Africa. Table 3 outlines the themes that emerged from the initial codes.

**Table 3: Themes and Sub Themes**

| Codes  | Themes and sub-theme                         |
|--|--|
| Convergence of roles<br><br>Manager role<br><br>Technician role<br><br>Reputation management<br><br>Stakeholder management<br><br>Boundary spanning              | Role Convergence                             |
| Company culture dictates environment<br><br>Comfort expressing views<br><br>Planned vs. unplanned occurrences<br><br>Type of industry e.g. knowledge environment | Corporate culture influences decision making |
| Consumer demands<br><br>Brand responsibility to their consumers and environment  | Scepticism towards brand activism            |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>Alignment between cause and company values</p> <p>Social responsibility</p> <p>Scepticism related to motive behind brand activism</p> <p>Social responsibility with benefits</p>                            |   |
| <p>Confusion between brand activism and corporate social responsibility</p> <p>Not prevalent in South Africa as yet</p> <p>Few examples of BA in South Africa</p>  | <p>Brand activism not prevalent in South Africa</p>                               |
| <p>Who makes the decision?</p> <p>Brand values must align to cause</p> <p>Motivated by profit</p> <p>Scepticism</p> <p>Integrity and Authenticity in brand activism important</p>                              | <p>Corporate Responsibility 2.0</p>   |
| <p>Huge responsibility</p> <p>Boundary spanner role</p> <p>Provide advice to management</p> <p>Constant messaging to remind stakeholders of campaign</p> <p>Ruled by dominant coalition, CEO has final say</p> | <p>Moral agents of the organisation</p> <p>Reluctance to assume this position</p> |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Reluctance to assume this responsibility   |   |
| Should know what is happening in the environment<br><br>Advise management<br><br>Communication an executive function, taken seriously  | Organisational change agent                   |
| PR department responsible for stakeholder communication<br><br>Should be everyone's responsibility<br><br>BA should be planned, strategic and deliberate<br><br>It should sit with comms as they are the custodians of the organisation's brand and reputation | Brand activism is a public relations function |

#### 4.1.4 Reviewing potential themes

According to Braun and Clarke (2012), this step involves reviewing the developing themes, to quality check and to ensure that the themes work against the data.

##### 4.1.4.1 Theme 1: Role convergence

The data revealed that several areas of the public relations function are occupied by respondents participating in this study. Participants described functions that range from that of strategic or managerial function to technician. This data correlates with tenets in role theory that state that expectations of others dictate the role carried out by an individual and is important in answering the research question relating to how public relations practitioners are responding to brand activism in their organisations. Public relations practitioners' role in brand activism might be limited to what is expected of them.

#### **4.1.4.2 Theme 2: Corporate culture influences decision making**

This theme was supported by the theory that culture does have an effect on the organisation, particularly where decision making is concerned. Participants' responses to the questions relating to the organisation's culture and their level of comfort within their organisation varied, with the general consensus being that culture did have an effect on the level of activity in the organisation. This theme helped the researcher to answer the research questions relating to the current nature of public relations practitioners' roles in brand activism in South Africa and what the current expectations of public relations practitioners are, regarding their role in brand activism.

#### **4.1.4.3 Theme 3: Scepticism towards brand activism**

The research found that the majority of participants harbored some scepticism towards brand activism. The question of an organisation's motive for brand activism was raised, i.e., are brands participating in brand activism for purely altruistic reasons? Participants did however, acknowledge that organisations have a social responsibility towards their customers and that brand activism might be an example of this social responsibility. This assists the researcher in answering the question on how public relations practitioners are responding to brand activism in large organisations.

#### **4.1.4.4 Theme 4: Brand activism not prevalent in South Africa**

The data that led to the formulation of this theme correlates with the researcher's experience of finding very little to no examples of brand activism in South Africa. Of the participants interviewed, only one demonstrated that their organisation was in some way involved in brand activism. The example of brand activism consisted of nothing more than messaging on the organisation's platforms. Since brand activism is not prevalent in South Africa as yet, this theme could assist in answering the research question related to how public relations practitioners are responding to brand activism in large organisations, and what the current expectations of public relations practitioners are regarding their role in brand activism.

#### **4.1.4.5 Theme 5: Corporate Social Responsibility 2.0**

Kotler and Sarkar (2020) stated that brand activism is just a natural progression from corporate social responsibility. The data revealed that many of the participants were of the opinion that there was a subtle but distinct difference between the two activities, which is supported by the

theory outlined in chapter 2. This theme however does in some way correlate with the theme above, scepticism towards brand activism, as participants are of the view that organisations rarely do anything for purely altruistic reasons.

#### **4.1.4.6 Theme 6: Moral agents of the organisation**

The practitioner's belief as to whether it is the responsibility of the public relations practitioner to act as the moral agent of the organisation has a bearing on whether the public relations practitioner would take responsibility for brand activism in an organisation. This theme assists in explaining how public relations practitioners are responding to brand activism in large organisations as well as what their current expectations are regarding their role in brand activism.

#### **4.1.4.7 Theme 7: Organisational change agents**

The data that emerged on whether the respondents saw themselves as change agents is significant to the study as it assists in determining who the respondents believed were the drivers of change within an organisation. Participants exhibited mixed reactions regarding the idea that public relations practitioners act as change agents within the organisation, with some respondents questioning whether the organisation saw value within the public relations function. This theme is relevant to answer the research question relating to the current expectations of public relations practitioners regarding their role in brand activism and the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism in South Africa.

#### **4.1.4.8 Theme 8: Brand activism, a public relations function**

The literature reviewed for this study, revealed that brand activism is a relatively new concept and currently, the majority of studies around this phenomenon is housed in the marketing sphere. The data revealed that participants believed that the function should reside with the public relations department. This theme correlates with the first theme relating to the various roles enacted by the public relations practitioner within the organisation. This theme assists in answering the research question relating to the current expectation of public relations practitioners regarding their role in brand activism and the current nature of public relations roles in brand activism in South Africa.

#### 4.1.5 Defining and naming themes

The penultimate step in Braun and Clarke's (2012) steps to thematic analysis includes defining and naming themes for the study by summing up the essence of each theme in a succinct manner. The following table provides the definition of the themes outlined in the section above.

**Table 4: Defining and naming themes**

| Themes                                       | Definition  |
|--|---|
| Role Convergence                             | Data showed that public relations is practiced at all levels within organisations in South Africa and that often the type of organisation will determine the role occupied  |
| Corporate culture influences decision making | Just as the type of organisation affects the practice of public relations, so too does the culture of the organisation. This will determine whether an organisation participates in brand activism or not.  |
| Scepticism towards brand activism            | The attitude that respondents have towards brand activism is important to gauge their current expectations regarding their role in brand activism   |
| Brand activism not prevalent in South Africa | Seeing that this is an emerging field, the researcher can gauge whether participants feel that there is a place for brand activism in organisations in South Africa, thereby gauging how they respond to the practice, as well as their current expectations  |
| Corporate Social Responsibility 2.0          | Literature reviewed showed that brand activism can be seen as a progression of CSR. Since CSR is housed in the corporate communication department, the argument can be made that brand activism should be housed there as well.   |
| Moral agents of the organisation             | In addition to overt roles played by public relations practitioners, that of moral agent is assumed as the public relations practitioner plays an advisory role to management. They assist management to make ethical and moral decisions. This could determine whether an organisation participates in brand activism or not.  |
| Organisation change agents                   | The majority of respondents believed that they should be the drivers of change in the organisation, based on their duties and functions. This is important to this study as initiatives such as brand activism require the entire organisation to be on board if they are to be successful and public relations departments are usually at the forefront of these campaigns |
| Brand activism, a public relations function  | This theme was vitally important to gauge where participants believed the management of brand activism should lie and why.  |

## **4.1.6 Discussion of themes and/or findings**

### **4.1.6.1 Role convergence**

When asked about the role they fulfil, the interviewed participants described functions that vary according to the level they occupied in the organisation, from that of strategic or managerial to a technical role. The majority of the participants (4) had a direct influence in the development and implementation of programmes within their organisation. They indicated that their duties, indicative of those functioning at a managerial or strategic role, included but were not limited to, reputation management, stakeholder management and playing an advisory role to top management. The remaining participants occupied a public relations technician role, where duties include writing, photography, editing, social media management and report writing.

My typical roles include writing and curating three newsletters for the organisation. Above that I plan our social media posts and production (Respondent 2)

This correlates with the roles outlined in chapter 2, that describe the four roles enacted by public relations practitioners in organisations, namely expert prescriber; the communication facilitator; the problem-solving process facilitator and the communication technician. The four role typology was subsequently formulated into a two role typology, namely the technician and the manager, which encompassed the expert prescriber, communication facilitator and the problem-solving process facilitator.

However, it emerged that there was an element of cross-functionality in some of the duties performed by two of the participants, who even though they occupied a senior managerial role (strategic), found that they were still tasked with responsibilities that might be carried out by a public relations practitioner occupying a technician's role.

There is a convergence of different things into one job, and it's sometimes a bit tricky because you need to make sure what you are busy with. Are you busy with communications? Are you busy with marketing? Are you busy with a P.R. thing? (Respondent 1)

Even though I am communication manager, the nature of my work still revolves around internal communication, editing the website, Facebook administration, specific events and brand management (Respondent 5)

A factor analysis study conducted by Reagan, et al. (1990) determined that the four roles were difficult to differentiate because of role overlap. This could be due to the size of the public relations department, or the organisation's environment, which, as the literature in chapter 2 has shown, has a direct influence on how public relations is practiced in an organisation. The effect an organisation has on the way public relations is practiced is determined in part by whether they operate from a closed or open system perspective. Organisations acting in a closed system, cut themselves off from their environment and external stakeholders, and do not take these into account when formulating their strategic plans. The way public relations is practiced in these organisations are often dictated by the dominant coalition (Broom 1986 in Dozier, 1992). Practitioners in these organisations are also more likely to inhabit the technician practitioner role, as their function would be to disseminate, and package messages formulated by the dominant coalition.

Organisations operating in an open system, see public relations practitioners enact more of a managerial or strategic role. "As decisions about organizational responses to the environment become more novel and nonprogrammed, practitioner roles change" (Grunig, 1992:342). Katz and Khan (1978), in Grunig et al. (1992) theorised that in an open system, organisations and groups in their environment are interdependent. In these organisations, the public relations practitioner might inhabit the managerial or strategic role, which includes that of boundary spanner. They will constantly monitor the organisation's environment for any potential threats or opportunities that might affect the organisation. The public relations practitioner in this role, in the opinion of the author, is well placed to identify activist opportunities that might present themselves to the organisation.

#### ***4.1.6.2 Corporate culture influences decision making***

There were mixed views when participants were asked about the level of comfort they felt expressing their views or dissent within their organisation. Half of the respondents said that they felt a certain level of comfort within their organisation to express their opinions, thoughts and feelings to management when the need occurred,



*In a knowledge environment, I'm a believer that people have to talk and then everybody has to put their position forward and ultimately, we try to reach consensus. If I put my views across I normally do it without fear (Respondent 5).*

However, one participant suggested that:

*It depends on who you're talking to and it depends on the topic. I think there are certain things when there is room to engage and negotiate, but there are certain instances when that room is not right, and I think in corporate we talk a lot about picking your battles (Respondent 3).*

It was suggested that the organisation's culture and top management structure has an influence over when and how they voice their opinions about certain matters. A participant suggested that:

*The culture of the company is still something I'm getting used to, I don't feel 100% freedom all the time, it's different to what I come from, and it's different to what I thought my role would be (Respondent 2).*

It was also suggested that the decisions of shareholders hold prominence and they have the final say, regardless of what is being suggested or recommended by the corporate communication department and has significant bearing on the organisation,

*Shareholders also need to be consulted on a regular basis, and these are also very hefty white rich males who come with their own very strong opinions. So, whether we also say that this is the direction we want to go, if majority of the shareholders disagree, unfortunately the nature of our company we will then have to go with what they say (Respondent 2).*

As outlined in the literature review in chapter 2, for an organisation to achieve its strategic goals, all members of the organisation must share the same set of values, beliefs, attitudes and ways of doing things. The values and beliefs that organisational members hold prior to

joining an organisation might not be enough to help the organisation attain its goals, therefore they need to adapt to the culture of the organisation.

An organisation that does not foster a culture of openness and transparency, which allows its members to fully express their dissent, views or opinions about certain issues, is, as the literature has shown, one that operates in a closed system as it shuts itself off to potential ideas, innovations, suggestions and criticisms from its members, that could perhaps benefit the organisation in the long run. Public relations practitioners operating in this environment are not empowered to serve the organisation to their full potential.

#### **4.1.6.3 Scepticism towards brand activism**

Participants indicated mixed views on the reason or motivation behind organisations or brands lending their voice to social activism campaigns. Most of the participants, showed scepticism in their responses by suggesting that organisations will never intentionally participate in any activity unless there was the possibility of some positive returns for the organisation. Most of the participants believe organisations are only concerned with the bottom line and will never intentionally participate in any activity that might lead to a loss in profits and/or damage the organisation's reputation.

*Organisations engage in brand activism to show that they stand for a cause but ultimately it is for profit margins (Respondent 4).*

*A company will never do something like that if they don't see the possibility to maybe get something positive out of it (Respondent 1).*

Two participants, however, were of the opinion that organisations have a social responsibility towards their consumers, or the community they inhabit. It was suggested that consumers want to be associated with socially responsible brands and that consumers are more demanding of brands to be socially responsible. It was also suggested that the cause the organisations support should be aligned to their values, mission and vision.

*We are realising that our consumer is smart. Consumers are demanding that they want more socially responsible brands (Respondent 3).*

*I think it is good for brands to associate with a particular cause, you know especially when it is aligned with the core values of that particular organisation then it benefits both the brand as well as the actual cause (Respondent 6).*

Since brand activism is a relatively new concept, it is not surprising to find that there is some scepticism levelled at the practice. Brands deciding to engage in activism walk a precarious tight-rope between connecting with their target customer base, creating a favourable impact on their bottom line, and improving customer loyalty or risk alienating customers who do not agree with the stance the organisation is taking. Furthermore, according to Shetty, et al. (2019), if the brand does not align the campaign activities to the organisation's core values, ethics and vision, it may come off as an advertising or marketing gimmick.

As one respondent accurately pointed out, today's consumers are more demanding of the brands they support. Organisations operating today are held to a higher standard than ever before. Public relations practitioners can help navigate the organisation through the precarious waters of brand activism, by helping to identify the causes that the organisation's publics are passionate about (through boundary spanning), and to align the organisation's values, mission, and vision to those of a particular cause. As Eyada (2020) posits, consumers will react negatively to brands advocating or promoting a cause that they have not historically supported, and if it does not fit or tie into the nature and value of the brand.

#### **4.1.6.4 Brand activism not prevalent in South Africa**

Of the participants interviewed for this study, only one indicated that their organisation was involved in some type of brand activism, albeit not very overtly, according to the respondent. The respondent indicated that their organisations participated in a campaign to promote anti-violence against women, but the campaign consisted of notices on the organisation website and the development of a helpline for victims of domestic violence.

When asked about brand activism activities, most of the participants identified a type of corporate social responsibility initiative in which their organisation was involved as opposed to a brand activism campaign initiative that fits the standard definition. One participant described an initiative carried out by her organisation, whereby a hotline was created, for victims of domestic abuse. Victims could call this free hotline and receive immediate assistance wherever they resided. Given the examples of brand activism mentioned earlier, this activity seems more like Corporate Social Responsibility, as the brand is delivering a service as opposed to using their brand to fight against domestic abuse. Another participant described an activity where girl children were taught how to code. The organisation was engaging in an activity that empowered female learners, through a Corporate Social Responsibility programme and not using their brand as a tool to call for the empowerment of females. A third participant described their organisation as being an activist by making education accessible to “the poorest of the poor”. He felt that by catering to the marginalised and underprivileged, his organisation was displaying an element of brand activism. He believed this was true brand activism as it was part of the organisation’s mandate and not used in an advertising campaign or for profit.

In the opinion of the author, these findings are not surprising. Not only is brand activism a new concept, but of the literature reviewed for this study, there was none to be found that highlighted examples of brand activism in South Africa. Most of the literature focused on the traditional forms of activism, which includes those levelled against organisations by activism groups on the outside.

The only clear example of brand activism the author found in South Africa, was that of the Unilever brand JOKO, who partnered with POWA (People Opposing Woman Abuse) to launch their #EndDomesticSilence campaign. The nation-wide rallying behind the call to end domestic violence, seems to have been one that was taken up by a several organisations in South Africa. However, the activism displayed was limited to messages of support on websites, or programmes aimed at internal stakeholders (staff), and according to the Institute for Security Studies Africa, 60 organisations in South Africa signed the women’s empowerment principles which promotes guidelines for best business practices that empower women (Van Heyningen, 2020).

It is also not surprising that most of the respondents described their organisations corporate social responsibility programmes when asked whether their organisation engaged in brand activism. The reason for this could be attributed to the observation made by Kotler and Sarkar (2019) that brand activism can be viewed as a natural progression from corporate social responsibility. Another reason for this, could be that brand activism is an emerging phenomenon and is not as prevalent in South Africa as it is in the United States and the United Kingdom.

#### **4.1.6.5 Corporate Social Responsibility 2.0**

All the participants interviewed for this study indicated that they felt that corporate social responsibility and brand activism were similar activities that could be carried out by an organisation. One common theme that emerged was the fact that organisations in South Africa are mandated by government and by the King IV report on governance to incorporate corporate social responsibility programmes into their activities, whereas brand activism is not compulsory.

*Corporate social responsibility initiatives are closely related to the business, but everything is very strategic so that we can gain our BE points and improve our scorecard (Respondent 2).*

Participants also reiterated the belief that organisations rarely participated in any activities that did not have some form of positive repercussions for their activities.

*Corporate social responsibility is also done with an ulterior motive, you do social responsibility programme because it is something that you have discovered and that you want to get noticed in your community... you'll be dishonest to yourself if you don't wear your branding, T-shirts, people have to see its you that is doing this social responsibility (Respondent 1).*

For most respondents, the management of these corporate social responsibility programmes was the responsibility of a department within the public relations / corporate communication/ corporate affairs. After reminding participants of the definition of brand activism, they agreed that there was a subtle but significant difference between the two activities. As Eyada (2020:31) states, "brand activism is an evolution of corporate social responsibility where brands make decisions and create content that benefit the societies and audiences affected by their products. Taking corporate social responsibility, a step further, brands become active as visible identities leading a way towards a certain cause". This finding reiterates that brand

activism is an emerging concept and that organisations in South Africa have not explored how their brands can make a difference to the societies they inhabit through brand activism.

#### **4.1.6.6 Moral agents of the organisations**

There was a mixed reaction by participants regarding their belief that the public relations practitioner should act as the conscience of the organisation, even though the public relations department / corporate communication department is the custodian of the organisation's reputation. Respondent 2 agreed that this would be the ideal position for the public relations practitioner, however, she did not believe that professionals are valued as experts in their field as are legal advisors or accountants in an organisation. She indicated that the organisational culture does not always make it possible to act as the moral conscience of the organisation.

Respondent 4 felt that public relations practitioners had a role to play but that they should not be seen as the "alpha and omega".

Respondent 3 however, felt that being tasked with being the conscience of the organisation was a big ask and a huge responsibility. She noted that the role of the public relations practitioner was to serve the best interests of both the organisation and its audience.

*We have a role to play, but I don't think we can solely be the custodians or be the conscience of the organisation. Because we deal with perception. We must manage the narrative and perception as best we can (Respondent 3).*

Respondent 5 believed that the public relations department was responsible for providing continuity to programmes launched by the organisations, and that it was the public relations department's responsibility to constantly remind stakeholders of the campaigns and activities in which the organisation was involved.

In her study, Bowen (2008) argued that the ethical conscience in an organisation should reside within the public relations function since "responsiveness to stakeholder's concerns and an obligation to learn, innovate and improve performance is at the heart of true accountability" (Dando and Swift, 2003:198). For public relations to function optimally within an organisation, ideally, they should have a seat amongst the dominant coalition, where they can influence decision making and strategic plans. An intricate understanding of the environment the organisation inhabits, as well as how its plans and decisions affect the environment is

important for ethical decision making (Bowen, 2008). No other function interacts with the organisation's public more than the public relations function, and because of this, they have a deeper understanding of the values and beliefs held by the organisation's publics. These values and beliefs can then be interpreted for the dominant coalition and can be considered when strategic plans and decisions are being made by the organisation. This is what contributes towards ethical decision making.

An increase in a more socially conscious public has seen a rise in activism initiatives. As mentioned in the literature review in chapter 2, the organisation exists by permission of society, and has a responsibility towards the environment it inhabits. Therefore, organisations cannot remain impassive to social movements taking place in their environment, as these will ultimately affect the organisations' operations, either positively or negatively. Most of the participants in this study did not feel that it was the responsibility of the public relations practitioner to act as the moral conscience of the organisation and suggested that the responsibility should not lie within a single department. It was also suggested that because the practitioner does not operate at a strategic level, the opinions and suggestions by them are not valued or taken into consideration when making organisational decisions. While the literature argues that the public relations practitioner is the most suitable person to be the ethical conscience of the organisation, the data revealed that the majority of the respondents showed a reluctance towards taking on this role.

#### **4.1.6.7 Organisational change agents**

The majority of the participants were of the view that the public relations practitioner should be at the forefront of change and innovation within the organisation. Since most of the respondents served on strategic management forums, they could play a boundary spanner role and advise top management on any developments in the environment that could affect the organisation. As respondent 6 noted, in her organisation the group manager for communication has a seat on the executive management panel proving, in her opinion, that communication is highly valued, and that communication is an integral part of business.

Respondent 1 was of the view that public relations practitioners *"should have their finger of the pulse, change should not happen because it was reported by a sales or marketing team. It should come from corporate communication who should have their ear to the ground"*.

Respondent 4 relayed his recent experiences following the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020 and how the corporate communication department, where he serves as manager, was responsible for helping to facilitate and assist colleagues to adapt to the new normal.

He further stated that *“I think I am a go-to person and I am also believing that the PR unit or practitioner should be at the forefront of change”*.

As mentioned in the literature, the culture of an organisation is described as those shared values, beliefs, norms and attitudes held by members of an organisation. According to Coates, in Newsom, et al. (2010), culture has a strong influence on whether an organisation is willing to change, promote innovation, encourage dissent and criticism, or allow any other qualities that make for a competitive firm. The public relations function has long been tasked with the responsibility of curating the culture of the organisation and ensuring that it is perceived positively by both internal and external audiences. This is done by utilising public relations tactics and techniques, such as research, creating awareness through campaigns and programmes, and using communication to affect social change. Demetrious (2013) states that while social change is difficult, language and other communication processes are important tools to help transform meaning.

#### **4.1.6.8 Brand activism, a public relations function**

Most of the respondents felt that the management of brand activism should lie with the public relations department. For brand activism to be effective, it needs to form part of a strategic plan for the organisation. An organisation participating in brand activism could risk reputational damage if consumers feel that the organisation is being insincere or using the opportunity to gain market share. Since the public relations department is responsible for the management of the organisation's reputation (Hutton et al, 2001), it therefore makes sense, in the opinion of the author, that the management of brand activism should lie within the public relations department.

Respondent 3 was of the opinion however, that functionally, the management of brand activism should be managed across all business platforms, however the public relations department should ultimately be held accountable for brand activism.



*Like reputation management, it takes all of us to make it happen, it has to be a collaborative effort, like culture, advocacy and purpose is something that has to cut across business. But somebody has to be held accountable for it somehow, I would say it must sit with corporate communications, I would say it must sit with the entire corporate affairs (Respondent 3).*

Respondent 1 believed that should brand activism fall within any other department such as sales or marketing, the activity could come across as being inauthentic.

*The moment you start using it as part of your marketing campaign, or even your communication campaign, and that to me is where I start to have doubts about the integrity of that company (Respondent 1).*

Respondent 2 felt that public relations practitioners should play an advisory role but that she was not trained or experienced enough to manage brand activism and that it might serve the organisation better if a consultant agency was brought in to manage the activity.

*I think as a practitioner, I think we should definitely play an advisory role. Social media is a wild uncontrollable beast, if you don't know what you are doing and if you are not planning and if you are not aware of the conversation that's happening, so as a practitioner's we should play an advisory role...we need to play an advisory role, but it's very difficult to play an advisory role if you yourself are not educated and knowledgeable around a certain topic (Respondent 2).*

The responsibility for the management of brand activism will differ, depending on what the organisation's reasons are for joining a campaign. More organisations are feeling pressure from consumers to show support for or against certain societal issues. In recent months, we have witnessed a surge of campaigns rallied around anti-racism, a call to end gender-based violence, climate change awareness and sexual harassment, to name a few. Consumers want to know that the brands they support, are purpose driven. In their research, Eyada (2020:31) found that "consumers consider the products they buy as an extension of their view, values, beliefs and lifestyles considering it a form of political and social act, and an opportunity to make an impact".

Organisations wanting to take advantage of the opportunity to represent themselves as being aligned to a social cause, in an attempt to boost revenue, or for publicity might be tempted to participate in brand activism, without any proper planning or research into what repercussions there might be for the organisation. Attempts like these can have serious negative implications and could result in backlash from or alienate consumers (Shetty, 2019). Kapitan, Kennedy and Berth (2019), in Aronson and Kato (2021), posit that inauthentic brand activism, by giving false signals, leads to negative brand equity and misleads consumers; they further state that it is unethical due to the mistrust it creates in consumers and could potentially hinder the possibility for social change. This sentiment was shared by respondent 1, who stated that inauthentic brand activism could actually harm the cause. Vredenburg et al, (2020) coined the term “woke-washing” to describe brands participating in inauthentic brand activism.

Brand activism, even if it is done for all the right reasons, is not without its risks. Organisations still risk alienating a segment of their customer base who do not agree with the stance the organisation is taking on a certain issue. Key, et al. (2021) state “that a strategic mindset is crucial...for a brand to cross the chasm from product/service provider to change agent through activism requires a well thought out and strategic plan”.

Vredenburg, et al. (2020:445) argue that authenticity of brand activism is determined by three key characteristics of the brand:

- (1) its core purpose and values as a reflection of employees, brand promise, and caretaking of stakeholder needs and wants and how those are articulated and understood in the marketplace;
- (2) the messaging type and content circulated through brand vehicles, traditional media vehicles, and peer-to-peer and social media vehicles/channels; and
- (3) its corporate practices and how key stakeholders catalogue, demonstrate, and interpret these practices in the marketplace.

Each of the characteristics highlighted above identifies a function that falls within the domain of the public relations. From caretaking of stakeholder needs and articulating these to top management (strategic/management function), to the formulating of messages and circulating

these via various platforms (manager/technician function) and how key stakeholders interpret practices in the marketplace (strategic/management function), public relations, regardless of which level it is practiced within the organisation, is the function best suited within an organisation to be the custodian of an organisation's brand activism efforts.

## **4.2 Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, the findings based on data collected from interview participants, were presented, and discussed. The researcher identified themes based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis. Quotations from interview participants were included to substantiate and provide context to the study.

The concluding chapter addresses the research questions, based on the findings. Concluding remarks, and recommendations for future research by the researcher are also included.

## **CHAPTER 5:**

### **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

The concluding chapter presents and discusses the findings in relation to the research questions, as well as limitations to the study. Since the area of brand activism is an emerging one, the researcher found that a significant amount of existing research is related to the marketing field, thus recommendations for future research into brand activism and how it relates to public relations will be discussed.

#### **5.2 Answers to research questions**

The researcher interviewed full-time public relations practitioners, employed at large organisations within South Africa to assess the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism in organisations in South Africa. The researcher also endeavoured to determine what the current expectations are of public relations practitioners regarding their role in brand activism and how public relations practitioners were responding to brand activism in large organisations in South Africa. Answers to the research questions posed in this study are presented in the following sections.

##### **5.2.1 Research question 1 - What is the current nature of the public relations practitioner role in brand activism?**

The main aim of this study was to determine what the current nature of the role of the public relations practitioners is in brand activism in South Africa. When respondents were probed about whether their organisation participated in brand activism activities, most of them described some form of corporate social responsibility project. However, when clarity on the definition of brand activism was provided, the majority of the participants indicated that their organisations were not currently involved in any type of brand activism campaign. One of the respondents mentioned that their company was involved in a campaign to support the call for an end of gender-based violence in South Africa, but that most of the activity consisted of messaging on the organisation's website. The researcher found that there is limited participation of brand activism in South Africa, as a result, this might explain the lack of research in this area.

Currently in South Africa, there is a nation-wide call from government to end gender-based violence and while several businesses in South Africa have heeded the call to rally around the cause, this is however limited to slogans pasted on the organisation's website, or as one retailer in South Africa attempted, a slogan on their shopping bags (see Figure 4). While these interventions are commendable, the campaigns seemed to have a lifespan of only a few months. Furthermore, although this particular organisation's website has been populated with generous amounts of resources relating to gender-based violence in the form of videos and articles related to the cause, the organisation showed little demonstration of how their commitment to the cause has been entrenched in their operational activities.



**Figure 4: Grocery bags with activism slogans**

Based on these findings, and the limited literature on brand activism from a South Africa perspective, the researcher can infer that public relations practitioners in South Africa are currently not actively engaged in any brand activism initiatives and therefore do not play any role in the planning, development or execution of these programmes. However, the most prevalent form of activism in South Africa right now is the movement for an end to gender-based violence in the country. The researcher found that activism activities were limited to messaging on the organisations' website or slogans printed on material. Since messaging and website management usually falls to the public relations department, it suggests that

practitioners are playing a role in crafting and disseminating the messages of support, this is a role that is predominately played by the public relations technician.

### **5.2.2 Research question 2 – What are the current expectations of public relations practitioners regarding their role in brand activism?**

Role theory, which is developed from a sociological tradition, is concerned with the cues that guide and direct an individual's behaviour in a social setting. People are social actors who learn and adopt behaviours appropriate to the positions they occupy in society. Once the central idea of individuals acting out certain roles is accepted, there are extensions in the form of confidence in one's role, the competence of performance, commitment to role and role identity (Hogg and Doolan, 1999:598).

According to Moss and Green (2001:118), research into practitioner roles has explored links between the roles and the status and power of public relations units in organisations, practitioner involvement in strategic decision making, public relations participation in environmental scanning and issues management. The majority of participants responded positively when asked whether brand activism should be managed by the public relations department, and the consensus was that the management of brand activism should fall to the public relations department since brand activism was strategic. Participants were also concerned about the authenticity of brand activism and expressed concern that should it be managed by another function, such as marketing, the organisation could cause reputational damage if consumers felt that the campaign was run for the wrong reasons (profit driven).

As highlighted in the literature, any other role the public relations practitioner assumes, i.e., strategic, managerial or technician, is affected by factors in the organisation's environment as well as organisational culture. If the organisation's culture is progressive, forward thinking and is concerned with enacting change within the organisation, as well as in the environment, the public relations function is suitably placed to assist the organisation through this change. Participants noted that the public relations practitioner should have their ear to the ground, their finger to the pulse of the environment. Through the boundary spanning role, the public relations practitioner can monitor the environment for any eventualities that might affect the organisation. The public relations practitioner with access to the dominant coalition is best suited to influence strategic decisions and planning. Furthermore, the public relations function would be responsible for strategic planning of the campaigns as well as the crafting the

messages to accompany the brand activism campaign. These messages will not only be disseminated to the public, but through the public relations function, active engagement with the audience through various platforms will occur regularly to ensure the organisation's activities are still seen favourably by members in its environment. The public relations function is also equipped to deal with any negative repercussions that might occur as a result of brand activism, such as consumer boycotts or negative comments from consumers on social media or other platforms. Through constant monitoring and scanning, the public relations function can prepare for and mitigate these occurrences.

Given the nature of the role the public relations practitioner assumes, most of the respondents agreed that they expected the management of brand activism to fall within the sphere of their department's function.

### **5.2.3 Research Question 3 – How are public relations practitioners responding to brand activism in large organisations?**

Research question 3 was concerned with how public relations practitioners are responding to brand activism in large organisations in South Africa. From the findings, and based on the scarce literature on the topic from a South African perspective, it is clear that brand activism is not a common occurrence in South African organisations, as yet. Unlike organisations in the United States and other parts of the world, such as Nike, Patagonia, Ben & Jerry's, to name a few, the only clear example of brand activism the researcher could find was that of Unilever's JOKO #EndDomesticSilence campaign, which tied in with a nation-wide call from government and other organisations, to end gender-based violence in South Africa. Unilever is a multi-national company which has lent its voice to numerous activist causes around the world, so it is not surprising that they actively chose to support this cause in South Africa, as it aligns with the organisational ethos, mission and vision.

While most of the respondents agreed that the management of brand activism should fall to the public relations department, there was trepidation from the majority of respondents to the idea that the public relations practitioner should be the moral agent in society/organisation or that they should solely be responsible for change. While there were no examples of brand activism taking place at the organisations at which any of the respondents are employed, the question of authenticity and motivation for the activism was raised. So, should an organisation participate in brand activism, they must ensure that it is being done for the right reasons, and

that the cause aligns with the organisation's own vision, mission and values. The overwhelming theme from the findings relating to how practitioners are responding to brand activism was that of scepticism. Of the respondents interviewed, several mentioned that fact that organisations would never participate in an activity that did not benefit them directly. No organisation commits to a cause of activity for purely altruistic reasons.

### **5.3 Key findings**

The following key findings were identified in the study relating to the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism in South Africa.

- The findings of this study confirmed that brand activism is not a prevalent activity in organisations in South Africa, as yet. The most prominent example of brand activism was found to be initiated by a multi-national organisation with similar activism campaigns in other countries around the world. It was found that while some organisations have rallied behind the national cause to end gender-based violence in South Africa, these campaigns consisted of targeted messages on the organisations' websites or marketing material, and there was little evidence of how the organisation was supporting the cause beyond that. These campaigns also appeared to have a lifespan that only lasted a few months.
- The study found that brand activism was seen as a similar activity to that of corporate social responsibility, and while the literature states that brand activism is an evolution of corporate social responsibility, participants felt that the two activities were closely related and only differed in the manner of execution, since respondents felt that both activities were enacted by organisations to yield positive returns for the organisation.
- Since brand activism is an emerging phenomenon and one that we are most likely to see more examples of in the future, respondents felt that they were not equipped at present to manage brand activism, since information about the activity is still limited. It was suggested that a consultant firm be utilised to manage the activity, or that responsibility for the function should spread across the corporate affairs department.

### **5.4 Limitations of the study**

Public relations practitioners are not the decision makers in the organisation, and the directive whether to participate in brand activism or not would come from upper management. To



remain manageable, this study involved only public relations practitioners in organisations and not upper management, and therefore did not explore their opinions or ideas on brand activism.

The study focused on gauging the experiences and opinions of public relations practitioners towards brand activism in organisations in South Africa, it was not possible to explore the relationship between management, public relations practitioners and third-party marketers, in the wider concept of what brand activism is in South Africa and how social justice might be pursued beyond the scope of CSR and brand activism.

### **5.5 Recommendations for future research**

The researcher had an opportunity to discuss the concept of brand activism with public relations practitioners employed on a full-time basis at organisations in South Africa. It was not surprising that most of the participants were unaware of what the activity entailed. Further research on examples of brand activism from a South African perspective should be conducted in order to advance the field in this area.

It is clear from the findings, that an additional role for the public relations practitioner could be seen to be emerging due to the occurrence of brand activism in organisations. Further research should be conducted on what this role entails and how it differs or compares to current roles identified, i.e., that of strategist, manager, and technician.

Since the majority of the literature found on brand activism centred around the function placed within the marketing discipline, it is suggested that further research be conducted based on brand activism from a public relations perspective, and how public relations can be utilised to make the activity more meaningful and one that can create lasting change in the organisation and its environment.

Further research could be conducted to gauge upper management's understanding and opinions on brand activism and whether they believe that public relations practitioners have a more pertinent role to play in the activity.

## 5.6 Conclusion

This study aimed to determine the current nature of public relations practitioner roles in brand activism in South Africa, (ii) to determine what the current expectations are of public relations practitioners regarding their role in brand activism and (iii) to gauge how public relations practitioners are responding to brand activism in large organisations.

The findings indicate that brand activism is not a prevalent feature in organisations in South Africa at present and based on this, public relations practitioners are not enacting any role related to brand activism. Of the few organisations that were involved in activism efforts, i.e., the call to end gender-based violence, activities were limited to messages on websites, or social media or printed on marketing material. The researcher concludes that if public relations practitioners are involved in brand activism in these organisations, it is in the role of public relations technicians.

The findings did show that there was a fair amount of scepticism levelled at the activity from respondents, and that they felt that the management of brand activism should fall to the public relations function to ensure that the activity is not perceived as a marketing gimmick or as inauthentic by the organisations' publics.

From the research, brand activism falls within the same sphere as corporate social responsibility. In fact, it has been theorised to be an evolution of the function. Since CSR efforts are managed by departments within the corporate affairs/corporate communication function, respondents agreed that it made sense for the management of brand activism to fall under the same umbrella.

Like corporate social responsibility brand activism is closely tied to the organisations' strategic plans, reputation and stakeholder engagement initiatives. These are all areas that public relations currently have a vital role in managing. If brand activism is indeed an evolution of corporate social responsibility, the public relations practitioner should be empowered to manage the function and to do it in such a way as to create lasting meaningful change within the organisation and for its publics.

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## APPENDIX A: QUESTION GUIDE

1. As public relations/corporate communication specialist, could you give me an outline of what your job entails? **(Determine whether strategic, managerial or technical)**.  
*(Ask the practitioner about the level of the function and whether it is included in the highest management level of the organisation. Explore from here the need for power and whether the practitioner feels she or he has enough power to fulfill the public relation role as she or he wishes or sees best)*
2. Are you familiar with concept of brand activism? Or could you give me an idea of your understanding of the concept of brand activism? *If not give interviewee an explanation.*  
Have a standard definition of brand activism related to your study.
3. As a PR practitioner how have you been involved or where would you see yourself get involved?
4. What role do you think public relations practitioners would play in brand activism?
5. Are you familiar with the Nike *Black Lives Matter* Campaign? What was your initial reaction/perception, as a public relations person to arguably the most well know brand activism campaign – the Nike BLM campaign?
6. Does your organisation participate in Corporate Social Responsibility?  
In your opinion do you think there is a difference between an activist campaign like the Nike *Black Lives Matter* campaign and Corporate Social Responsibility?
7. Do you believe / think that the management of brand activism should lie within the domain of the public relations / corporate communication practitioner?
8. Do you think that it is expected that public relations practitioners act as drivers of social change within their organisation?

9. Currently within your organisation are you seen as the go-to person for driving change, or do you think as a PR practitioner you should be in the forefront of change seeing that it has to do with the image and reputation of the organisation?
10. Has your organisation participated in brand activism? If yes, ask how they participated in the brand activism. If no, ask whether should their organisation participate in brand activism, what role they feel they would play in the process.
11. Exploration of differences of opinion between practitioners and department and management. Ask for real examples. Discuss practitioners' comfort level with stating opposing views and the culture around difference in opinion and viewpoints in the organisation
12. Discuss the possibility of public relations as an activist function, both in the current organisations and in activist organisations such as environmental or social activist groups
13. Explore the organisational issues (both internal and external) that the practitioner feels strongly about and whether the practitioner has the power to address these issues. Ask for examples.
14. Discuss the organisation's attitude towards change in society and the business environment and whether the organisation is more open to change than in the past.
15. Explore the practitioners understanding of the role of change agent and whether this role is performed
16. Explore the role of the practitioner as "the conscience of the organisation"

## APPENDIX B: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



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**Approval period:** 12 August 2021 – 31 December 2022

This is to certify that the Faculty of Informatics and Design Research Ethics Committee of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology approved the methodology and ethics of Vicky-Lee Lee Shew (212079514) for the MTech Public Relations.

Any amendments, extension or other modifications to the protocol must be submitted to the Research Ethics Committee for approval.

The Committee must be informed of any serious adverse event and/or termination of the study.



**A/Prof I van Zyl**  
**Chair: Research Ethics Committee**  
**Faculty of Informatics and Design**  
**Cape Peninsula University of Technology**