

THE INCREASED APPLICATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION (PR) INDUSTRY: AN INTERNATIONAL REPLICATION AND COMPARISON STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, social media have become both a part of everyday life and a topic of research interest. The impact of the increased use of social media and their integration into society is important from the human science, business and organisational perspectives. This study set out to establish the factors influencing the increased application of social media in the South African public relations (PR) industry. Research conducted in other countries indicates that the impact of social media on PR practice is profound, and there exists a research gap for similar insights in South African PR practice. Specifically, all research on the topic has so far been conducted on developed economies and in first world countries. There is therefore a need to conduct research in a third world country with an emerging economy such as South Africa.

The main purpose of the study was to investigate how social media are impacting on organisations, and therefore PR practice, in the South African context by replicating a study carried out internationally. The secondary purpose was to compare the results of the South African study with those of the original study, which was conducted mainly in first world countries with developed economies. The study aimed to contribute to the theoretical body of knowledge as follows: first, from a practical perspective, the findings will be of future assistance to South African PR practitioners in identifying the possible impact and effects that social media could have, and might already have had, on communication strategies and objectives. Secondly, the study determined the extent to which social media are impacting on the PR industry in South Africa. Finally, the study adds an academic theoretical dimension to the research, having been conducted in the context of a meta-theoretical framework. It therefore offers an academic explanation of the study and its results, as an additional contribution to the existing body of knowledge.

The 11 research objectives for the study were empirically tested by using a cross-sectional quantitative survey design. The survey was a replica of the one used in the original study. Data collected from the Likert-type scale questions were analysed using the Chi square method to determine probability results.

The theoretical and literature review confirmed that the impact of social media on communication and PR practice is significant. The review also indicated that it is important to investigate this impact in a third world country, as internet penetration into these countries is very different from that of first world countries. The empirical section of the research showed that most of the respondents in the South African study agreed that the emergence of social media has changed the ways in which organisations communicate and handle both internal and external communication.

Results indicated that, overall, social media are having a positive effect on PR practice in South Africa. However, the overall perception by PR practitioners is that, in comparison with traditional media, social media have a long way to go in terms of accuracy, truth and ethical standards. If these platforms do perform as badly on the ethical level as PR practitioners perceive, there must surely be a significant need for organisational reputation management. There is also a significant need for organisations to design and implement research structures to monitor social media communication on their organisations, brands and messaging. Findings suggest that PR managers could use traditional media communication together with social media, as the two seem complementary to each other, and will become even more so in the future. PR communications strategies should allow for organisations to respond more rapidly to criticism than in the past. They should also incorporate transparency and ethical practice into organisational communication, as the nature of social media demands that organisations hold to higher ethical principles.