

**Public relations via Twitter: An analysis of South African  
commercial organisations**

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## **PLAGIARISM DECLARATION**

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Lungile Moyo,

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

AMA	American Marketing Association
BCCSA	Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa
CIPR	Chartered Institute of Public Relations
DMMA	Digital Media and Marketing Association
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICCO	International Communications Consultancy
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
PR	Public Relations
PRISA	Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa
PRSA	Public Relations Society of America
API	Application Programming Interface

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** As more people are using mobile phones to receive and read news, Twitter has become a popular communication tool, particularly for commercial brands in South Africa. This thesis investigates twelve South African organisations' use of Twitter. It portrays Twitter as an informational network that allows conversational communication. It seeks to identify how commercial brands in South Africa use Twitter as a public relations/communication tool.

**Aim and Objective:** In attempt to learn whether current South African tweets among certain organisations follow Western practices of public relations, the study aims to understand and identify how commercial brands in South Africa communicate with their publics through Twitter. Revealing the content of these organisations' tweets facilitated the fulfilment of this objective.

**Methods:** This study used a qualitative content analysis with a convenient sampling technique to analyse 2,000 tweets from the 12 organisations. The content analysis helped to reveal whether the tweets reflected the models of public relations communication provided by Grunig and Hunt (1984). The qualitative aspect of the content analysis helped to make meaning from the content provided in the tweets.

**Results:** The findings reveal that organisations are posting a wide range of content of both an informational and promotional nature, more so informational (996/50%). The findings also show that public relations practices in South Africa follow Western influences, as tweets using the models were comparable to the findings of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models. However, there is room for South African organisations to use culture specific models like *Ubuntu* to communicate with their publics to achieve two-way communication which was only found in 332 (17%) of tweets analysed. These findings are significant for acknowledging the role of social media, particularly Twitter, in public relations efforts within South Africa.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction**

Since the introduction of the printing press, the media landscape has changed greatly (Dahlgren, 2009). The change began in the 1960s with the ARPANET, then gained speed in the 1990s with the introduction of the Internet and blew up in 2004 with Web 2.0 (Brown , 2009). Essentially, these changes can be understood in light of communication tools no longer being based on the idea of ‘mass’ but of ‘network’ (Cardoso, 2008). Mass here refers to as a system of communicating messages (produced by media experts) uniformly to large audiences (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). In contrast, networked systems add a new dimension to communication, where the public can create and communicate their own messages (Potter, 2010). Essentially, networked communication relates to the different degrees of interactivity that our existing media allow (Cardoso 2008), social media for example. One simple reason for the change from mass to network communication is the fact that currently, there is an abundance of technological innovations. Another is in the ways users have chosen to socially appropriate them (Brown, 2009). Social media platforms in particular have established themselves as the main vehicles for mediated communication and socialisation (Svensson, 2012). The examples are well-known, from Facebook to Twitter and YouTube among others. This is something that commercial organisations today are becoming gradually aware of and are taking into account. More specifically, the change in communication has had a range of implications for public relations and other marketing communications industries.

### ***Social media***

Social media, defined by Safko and Brake (2009) as “conversational media” (p. 2), enables people to “gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions” (Safko & Brake, 2009,

p. 2). It allows users to be active and selective in their exposure to marketing, advertising and public relations messages (McLennan & Howell, 2010). Therefore it is clear why social media has become a new approach for public relations communication as it inspires dialogue between an organisation and its consumers at a faster rate than traditional forms of media (Newman, 2011). Even though there is a significant difference between social media and traditional media (as briefly stated above) when discussing social media, the term is often seen as an extension of traditional media (discussed in detail in Chapter 3). This is because traditional media can encompass social dimensions as well (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), e.g the radio. Talk shows and/or listener participation in programs are all characterised by interactivity. Previous studies, see Van Dijck (2013), Stephen and Galak (2012), and Evans (2012) agree that social media is multifaceted and needs to be expanded from traditional media, which symbolises the fact that newer technologies do not replace mass communication technologies but they co-exist while continuing to evolve (Brown, 2009).

Furthermore, the term social media cannot be understood without understanding Web 2.0. Web 2.0, the term given to describe a second generation of the Internet, is focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online (O'reilly, 2007). If the information that people are engaged with is information that they can contribute to and if the media they are consuming allows them to participate, that is the basis of Web 2.0 (Brown, 2009). This study understands social media in these terms; online platforms where individuals can create content, access information and be informed by others in the same network (Livingstone, 2008). It also follows that social media platforms are characterised by practices of constant updating (Livingstone, 2008; Svensson, 2012), speed (Van Dijk, 2006) and connectivity (Van Dijck, 2013; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Hanna, et al., 2011)

Today, the use of social media among individuals worldwide has increased over the years from only 8% usage in 2005 to 72% usage in 2013 (Smith & Brenner, 2013). At the most basic level, such statistics show that different countries are using social media for a variety of reasons, business included, and South Africa is no exception. Due to the fact that there is a wide use of social media today, take for example South Africa with 48.73% of the population connected to the Internet at home and/or at work, and 36% connected via their mobiles (DMMA, 2013), it has been important for researchers such as Lenhart et al., (2010), to understand an individual's technological environment. Mobile connectivity in particular is one of the most important factors which has led to the wide use of social media and social networks (Donner, 2008). Mobile phones have experienced a huge growth in recent years, particularly in South Africa, with their mobile use accounting for over 80% of the communication in the country<sup>1</sup>. According to the South African Audience Research Foundation report (2013), of the adult population (15+) 86% own mobile phones and 13.4% do not. Walton and Donner (2013) also state that by 2010, South Africa had over 100% mobile penetration. This rapid growth in mobile communication was also illustrated in the 2012 *The New Wave* report that claimed that in a country where 86% of adults owned a mobile phone, the main point of access to the Internet for the majority (or 71%) is their mobile phone<sup>2</sup>.

As this is evidently becoming the preferred method of connection by many in South Africa, it has been assumed that mobile usage by South Africans (and Africans from across the continent who are living in South Africa) has made it possible to increase communication within the country. This approach leads to the conclusion that as the technology spreads to the population the problem of the digital divide is resolved. However, South Africa still experiences limitations in Internet access.

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<sup>1</sup> SAARF. 2013. Retrieved: <http://www.saarf.co.za/amps/cellphone.asp>

<sup>2</sup> de Lanerolle, Indra (2012) *The New Wave*, South African Network Society Project, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

### *The Digital Divide*

The notion of digital divide can at times be misleading since it often implies a split between the haves and have-nots (Park, 2012). However, access to, and use of digital technologies is also dependent on other social and economic factors. The digital divide has been described by Warschauer (2001, p. 1) as “the social stratification due to unequal ability to access, adapt and create knowledge via use of information and communication technologies.” From this definition it is understood by the use of the term ‘stratification’ that the digital divide is not a two-sided division but a continuum based on the different degrees of access to information technologies. Furthermore, the use of the word ‘social’ points to the political, economic, institutional and cultural contexts that shape the different societies and the different asymmetries between them.

Generally, people from developed countries experience digital technology constraints much less than people in developing countries, such as South Africa (Cullen, 2001; Warschauer, 2004; Chinn & Fairlie, 2006). Walton and Donner (2013) list some of these technological constraints as, expensive hardware and lack of domestic manufacturing. Within South Africa technological divisions are experienced in more than just the urban and rural areas in the country. It has divisions within cities and across class lines. Kreutzer (2009) has provided examples of some of these ‘digital divides’. The author states that some divides are experienced between the upper class, the middle classes and the lower class, others are experienced in the educational sphere such as “the inequalities of access to computers and Internet within the education system” (p. 1). Others are experienced between the infrastructural, educational and economic differences in Internet access between urban and rural populations. The idea is that Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) here are unevenly distributed within these countries. However, as mentioned earlier, it is believed that mobile phones can increase public access to information and provide opportunities for individuals and nations to escape the boundaries of poverty (de Alcántara, 2001).

Providing access, however, does not naturally guarantee the usage of information. Castells (2001) argues that these technologies can instead create an environment where those with nothing of value to contribute to the information network are excluded. The idea of exclusion here is not the same as poverty, but describes a state where people cannot take part in key social activities (Saunders, Naidoo, & Griffiths, 2007). Therefore, according to Hargittai and Walejko, (2008), a participatory gap exists between those who are given equal access to the technologies and networks. If people do not become actively involved they will remain digitally challenged (Van Dijk, 2006). Therefore, it is not only levels of access, but the way people use the Internet, which can cause a second level digital divide (Van Dijk, 2006; Korupp & Szydlik, 2005; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Hawkins & Oblinge, 2006; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006), which refers to a gap not in access but in usage. Therefore, the digital divide is more than just a gap in physical access, rich or poor, but a divide that includes differences in the skills needed to use the technologies (Van Dijk, 2006).

While access and use of mobile services in South Africa continues to grow, for people who live in rural areas where connectivity is lower than in the urban areas (ITU, 2011), using the Internet and being able to access the same services, content and information is often a challenge despite the fact that they may have access to the Internet and cell phones or laptops. Broadband access in particular remains very low. Estimates from South Africa's 2013 census suggest that close to 60% of households have no access to the Internet<sup>3</sup>. While there is a large growth in the ICT sector in South Africa (Wolf, 2001), the growth has not been achieved by the primary objective of affordable access to all. According to an article titled *South Africa Connect: Creating Opportunities, Insuring Inclusion: South Africa's Broadband Policy* published by the Minister of

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<sup>3</sup> Stats SA (Statistics South Africa). (2013). General household survey, Stats SA, Pretoria.

Communications Yunus Carrim in 2013, “despite the take-off in mobile broadband, South Africa’s fixed broadband penetration remains poor compared to other lower middle income countries” (p. 6). People are faced with the cost of bandwidth, strength in connectivity issues and instability resulting in a lack of speed and reliability<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, services such as streaming an online radio channel or accessing a YouTube video may present challenges for people within the country even though, strictly speaking, they have access to the Internet. In other words, the digital divide also presents itself where people might have access but qualitatively different levels of access.

The digital divide offers great insight into how social media is and can be used to communicate, particularly in the business context where target markets can range from a whole population including urban and rural societies to much smaller ones. The ways in which people connect and how is important. With access to social media, people have begun to communicate differently with organisations and vice versa. Weinberg (2009) argues that social networking sites provide organisations with wider benefits of two-way communication. While traditional media still assists in spreading an organisation’s message effectively, social media has added a new dynamic that has made this information readily available as people are able to seek it themselves. This has made it important to understand social media in terms of public relations practice today. It is important to note that in recent years there has been a significant amount of attention paid to the role of online social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter (e.g Zhao & Rosson, 2009). These sites provide a number of opportunities for organisations to interact with the public and as people keep using these networks, it is important for organisations to understand how to use these tools as they relate to their public relations and communications practices.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

The public relations practice is used in this study as a way of understanding the way relationships are built by organisations with their publics and vice versa, with communication being the central focus. It is important to note that the practice of public relations encompasses a wide set of practices that do not all necessarily tie into simply understanding an organisation's communication via social media as organisations locate their approach to social media communication also as part of their marketing and/or advertising functions as well. However, this study explores the use of Twitter, as a form of social media, by organisations in South Africa, specifically in trying to achieve two-way communication with their consumers. A large portion of this study focuses on the relationships aspect built by communication via Twitter, and it is for this reason that public relations was chosen.

Even though this study approaches Twitter as a form of social networking, it should be noted that Twitter is different from the usual social networks such as Facebook or Myspace, where people commonly log on to socialize and connect. While connections are surely made on Twitter, the main reason people log on to Twitter is different, it is to share and receive news content (Kwak et al., 2010). The creators of Twitter themselves define the network as a "real time information network powered by people all around the world that lets you share and discover what's happening now". Therefore, it is evident that the key focus of Twitter is "real time information". Furthermore, users of Twitter can search for any form of information directly from the network (discussed in detail in Chapters 3 and 4), whereas other social networking sites such as Facebook only allow you to access information you allow on your newsfeed, therefore being a more shared network than Twitter (Brown, 2009). Even so, this study focuses on the social features of Twitter that makes it similar to a social network platform because it aims to understand the connections being made by organisations and their publics, however the use of

Twitter as an information network will not be disregarded completely as this study also focuses on communication from organisations to public, which calls for sufficient information sharing.

Ultimately, this study explores how South African organisations use Twitter to communicate with their consumers, by understanding the different public relations communication models and public relations practice in South Africa. The South African organisations studied in this research are commercial brands, that is, brands and organisations that set out to make a profit, as opposed to non-profit organisations, NGOs, and governmental organisations.

## **Background**

Public relations has been practiced throughout history, dating back to the period of the ancient Greeks (du Plessis, 2001). It gained momentum in the twentieth century (discussed in Chapter 2), however, this practice provided opportunities to keep people informed, but most of the time it was used to persuade people. For example, the Greek word *sematikos*, used to describe public relations, means semantics, which can be defined as how to get people to believe things and do things (Litwin, 2000). It is because of this that it had been referred to as a practice that ‘forces’ and ‘influences’ public opinion simply to generate publicity for a particular person, political party or organisation (Moloney, 2006). The practice was often misused and misunderstood, often being referred to as propaganda (Moloney, 2006). However, while the use of the term propaganda came about in World War II; both public relations and propaganda are concepts that have evolved over time. Currently, the purpose of public relations has evolved from simply generating publicity to focusing on relationships and building these relationships. One of the main reasons for this is because the Internet has made public relations ‘public’ again with blogs and sites such as Twitter and Facebook (Scott, 2008). It is clear, then, that new communication

technologies have changed the way in which organisations are communicating (Ghafoor & Martin, 2012).

In recent years, social media has been a widespread topic of discussion in numerous academic studies (a more detailed discussion is provided in Chapter 3). However, it is important to note that social media's ability to spread information and engage consumers has been recognised and studied by many researchers in different disciplines, for example, Agarwal & Mital (2009) who looked at social networking sites in the business practice in India; Elmore (2009), who focused on the different social network strategies in the business environment; Greenwald (2010) who evaluated social networking sites for business application; and Fernando (2007) who looked at the ways in which social media has changed the way people communicate and how things are presented. These and similar studies show the popularity of social media and its growth in the business industry. In the business environment most of the research has only described the features of these tools, for example Greenwald (2010), and Elmore, (2009). As a result, the changing landscape of public relations and new communication technologies is still a relatively new field of research. However, studies in the use of social media continue to grow.

It was noted that due to this changing landscape, public relations practitioners have developed communication models to assist them (James, 2009). These models (press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical), were developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984) and will be used in this study to provide an understanding of (a) public relations communication and (b) how it reflects the communication between South African organisations and their consumers. These models are used in this study because they are well used and commonly referred to in understanding public relations practices worldwide, but also because there have been few models developed to understand and identify the central ideas of public

relations and how they are related to each other (Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006). However, researchers such as Culbertson and Chen (1996) and Kent and Taylor (2007) suggest that Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models are much too complex to account for everything in every situation or culture. These authors point out that different cultures play in to the way public relations is practiced. Essentially, this is what will be further explored in the study within the South African context.

### **Problem Statement**

As this study explores how South African organisations use Twitter to communicate with their consumers and the different public relations communication models it is important to note that South Africa is a developing market that is experiencing many changes, especially in communication with regards to brands and their consumers (Hattingh, et al., 2012). Due to the emergence of new media technologies, communication patterns have evolved compared to traditional print and broadcast media (as discussed above). Brands have had to adapt to new ways of communicating, particularly in South Africa where, Twitter for example, is a relatively new information and communication tool, particularly in the organisational context (Mathee, 2011). Accomplishing marketing and/or public relations success will not result in doing what worked in the past, because as the market changes, the business approach must also adjust accordingly. It is therefore important to understand and identify how commercial brands in South Africa communicate, through public relations, with their consumers through Twitter using the already existing communication models provided by Grunig and Hunt (1984).

### **Purpose of the study**

Essentially, the purpose of this study is to discover how South African organisations use social media tools (Twitter) to build relationships with their consumers. The advent of new media

technologies such as Twitter, begs the question about where media leaves South African organisations practicing public relations? In the same way people can use the media and social networks to discuss the political, social and economic issues of the country, for example, people will also use these platforms to discuss brands and businesses, and these organisations need to be able to participate in those conversations.

### **Significance of Study**

This study begins from the premise that South Africa, a developing country, can provide a unique contribution to the understanding of public relations practices both internationally and locally. The practice of public relations has existed in South Africa even before the development of the PRISA (Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa), a governing body of public relations practice in South Africa, in 1957. Essentially, this study could contribute towards an understanding of how South Africa and its organisations establish themselves in local and global business environments. In recent years, South Africa has been trying to bring legitimacy to the field of public relations (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003). According to Sriramesh and Vercic (2003) “it tries to reconcile and situate its activities within the form of an ethical science.” and “in doing so, it tries to adopt a broader and more humane social vision in which accountability to its stakeholders is given full importance” (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003 p. 149). As mentioned above, public relations has always been seen as a ‘negative’ field or profession, however, Sriramesh and Vercic (2003) describe South Africa as being in a transitional phase and have highlighted the importance of public relations in South Africa.

South Africa provides a good framework for this study because it offers a good balance between developed and developing countries (Blumenfeld, 2010). According to the South African Consulate General in New York City website, South Africa is unique in that it combines being a

developing country with having an exceedingly developed first world economic infrastructure and a huge emergent market economy<sup>5</sup>. It has gone through a political transition in 1994, and at the same time managed to exceed many other African countries, such as Nigeria and Zimbabwe (to name a few), in terms of infrastructure and its developmental levels (Blignaut, 2009). However, because it is still a developing country, Mersham et al., (1995) state that South Africa stands to become much more progressive if people adapt to the challenges of the global village, while still preserving its own unique identity. Using South Africa as the context of this study also provides opportunities for further research into the wider field of African studies. South Africa is far more advanced in public relations than other African countries (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003), with Kenya and Nigeria close behind. It is currently the most developed country in Sub-Saharan Africa (Van Heerden, 2004), and could contribute to and set a trend on the African continent in the area of public relations. Essentially, the significance of this study is to contribute to the existing public relations literature locally and nationally.

Additionally, as a relatively new information and communication tool in South Africa (Matthee, 2011), Twitter, has been found by Jin, et al., (2013), Lee, et al., (2013), and Mogadala and Varma (2012), to provide useful information on people's online behaviour. Twitter allows users to access, create, and share information while staying up to date with worldwide trends. This is particularly significant because social media has attracted the interest of organisations, advertisers, and marketers due to its popularity (Shih, 2009). This often creates the assumption that organisations know how to and utilise these tools successfully in their public relations and other communication strategies. However, the literature review reveals organisations' limited understanding of the effectiveness of these tools. It is also important to note that the social media environment is very dynamic; its content and functionalities are continuously changing. The

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<sup>5</sup> South African Consulate General in New York City. Retrieved: [www.southafrica-newyork.net](http://www.southafrica-newyork.net)

study, therefore, aims to provide understanding into the practices currently taking place in South African communications environments. This study is a contribution to the necessary research into social media in South Africa, and how it reflects public relations practices. Many of the discussions offered in this study are still ongoing. In this regard, the study intends to build a foundation for future research. Given the important role that public relations clearly plays in South African organisations, it is essential for the study to explore the issues involved.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for the study is Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations communication described below:

**Press agency** (also known as the publicity model) – is characterised by one way communication. It uses manipulation and persuasion to influence the public to do what the organisation wants.

**Public information** – is also characterised by one way communication, however this model uses one way communication simply to spread organisational information.

**Two-way asymmetrical** – involves feedback but this feedback is often used mainly to change the public's mind to the organisations way of thinking.

**Two-way symmetrical** – is characterised by two-way communication between the organisation and the public in order to form mutually beneficial relationships.

The study notes that each of these communication models plays a large role in the development of public relations both internationally and in South Africa. Despite the fact that Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models were based on Western mentality, this study employs them here, in a South African context as they are equally appropriate for the purposes of reaching the current research objectives (discussed below).

## **Research Aims**

- To understand and identify how commercial brands in South Africa communicate with their consumers through Twitter.

## **Research Objectives**

- To characterise the content of these organisations' tweets using the already existing communication models provided by Grunig and Hunt (1984) based on international public relations practices.

## **Research Questions**

1. How do commercial brands in South Africa use Twitter as a communication tool?
2. How do these organisations' tweets reflect Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations?
3. How can these commercial brands build relationships with their publics using Twitter?

## **Research Design and Method**

This study will primarily use a qualitative content analysis research approach drawing on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations communication as a framework for the analysis. The study explores how these models are used in a South African context. The study will investigate how Twitter is used as a communication tool in a South African public relations context. The research methodology of the study is discussed further in Chapter 4.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an introduction to the study, explaining the background and context of the study and justifying the choice of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations communication. The chapter also highlighted the aims and objectives of the study, its significance, and the research questions that will be answered in the study. Chapter two provides a background to the field of public relations, focusing mainly on the aspects central to this study, such as the relationship aspect of public relations. The chapter provides a wide range of definitions of the term and explores the role of public relations as well as its functions and elements. While many of these definitions and terms are associated with a general outlook on the practice, the chapter includes a focus on the public relations industry in South Africa. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations will be introduced in this chapter and will set the tone for the later discussions in the study. This chapter also illustrates the other models of public relations practice that can be used in a South African context. The discussion in this chapter leads to an analysis of the current state of communication, business communication and social media in South Africa.

Chapter three highlights the social media aspect of this research. Definitions of terms are provided, and the chapter explores the rise in social media and its use by organisations. The chapter also illustrates social media in the business environment both in the past and present. Statistics of South African Internet and social media usage are provided to set the context and justify the need for such a study. This chapter also focuses on Twitter and a definition and background on the information network is provided.

Chapter four outlines the chosen research method providing a rationale for the research design and detailing the qualitative content analysis research method. The chapter also discusses the

brands that were chosen for this study and explains the selection of these brands. This chapter concludes with discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the chosen research methods.

Chapter five begins to outline some of the main findings of the study. It explores and outlines the way South African organisations use Twitter as a communication tool. This chapter highlights the effect numbers of followers and number of tweets, for example, can have on organisational communication. The chapter also presents general data from the organisations' Twitter feeds in order to explore and analyse how they use Twitter to communicate.

Chapter six explores how South African organisations' tweets reflect Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations. The chapter essentially focuses and characterises the content of the organisations' tweets using the already existing communication models provided by Grunig and Hunt (1984). The findings in this chapter are presented by use of the qualitative content analysis that determines how each brand utilises Twitter to communicate with their publics.

Chapter seven explores how organisations can build relationships with their publics on Twitter. The chapter highlights the findings from Chapter 6, and presents ways, through the South African environment, that these organisations can achieve two-way communication and build mutual relationships with their followers on Twitter. Chapter seven follows most of the literature from *Ubuntu*, a communication model in South Africa, which is highlighted in Chapter 2. The chapter concludes that the more social media evolves and organisations (through public relations) aim to have open conversations with their consumers, the more they begin to communicate with them.

Chapter eight summarises data presented which draws the study to a close. The findings will be summarised with reference to the theories used and ideas for further research is provided.

As illustrated above, public relations and communication is vital to any organisations' practice and strategy. However, with the rise of communications technologies and the Internet, ways of communicating with the public have changed and continue to change. This study explores current public relations communication trends in South Africa in light of further research

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **PUBLIC RELATIONS - A BRIEF BACKGROUND & LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter provides a background to the field of public relations and explores the field through existing and related academic literature. Within this chapter the academic disciplines of public relations communication are defined, beginning with a brief introduction to brands, branding and brand communication. The review is then extended to include the role of public relations, its elements and functions, as well as the current state of the public relations industry in South Africa. In trying to understand the communication models used within the South African context a *Eurocentric* and *Afrocentric* worldview are provided as a contrast to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models. These views are significant in the South African context. However most of the literature surrounds Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations, which will provide the basis for further discussions relating to public relations within the study. This discussion will establish the current state of public relations and social media in South Africa.

#### **Brands and Branding**

As the aim of this study is to understand and identify how commercial brands in South Africa communicate with their consumers through Twitter, a description of brands and branding follows in such a context.

To begin with, there are many definitions of the word 'brand', with scholars often describing the term as either a logo (e.g. Erdem et al., 2006; Aaker, 1991; Kotler et al., 1996), an identity system (e.g. Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Aaker, 2012; Wheeler, 2003), a company (e.g. Balmer & Gray, 2003; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Balmer, 2001), an image in consumers' minds

(e.g. Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Arslan & Altuna, 2010), or value system (e.g. Arvidsson, 2006; Pringle & Thompson, 2001; De Chernatony et al., 2011). While there are more definitions of the term for the sake of this research it is the consumer-centric nature of brands that is most important. Drucker (1954, p. 37) wrote that “it is the customer who determines what a business is, what it produces, and whether it will prosper.” In this regard, Ambler (1992, p. 12) defines a brand as “the promise of the bundles of attributes that someone buys and provides satisfaction...the attributes that make up a brand may be real or illusory, rational or emotional.” Similarly, De Chernatony and McDonald (1992, p. 18) describe a brand as “...an identifiable product augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant unique added values which match their needs most closely. Furthermore, its success results from being able to sustain these added values in the face of competition.” These definitions differ from Aaker’s (1991, p. 39) definition, which sees a brand as “a distinguishing name and/or symbol such as logo, trademark or package design intended to identify the goods, services of either one seller or group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors.” However, as seen from Ambler’s (1991) and De Chernatony and McDonald’s (1992) definitions, brands, to some extent, define an individual’s atmosphere and categorises them with a particular lifestyle. Brands essentially add value to one’s life, which makes them an important construct in the field of marketing and public relations.

A brand name is among the most important aspects of any organisation. They offer organisations an opportunity to own a position and image in consumers’ minds (Martinez, Polo, & de Chernatony, 2008). This is important in the age of networked media, where consumers have many communication channels to choose from and participate in. Previously organisations have been communicating brand meanings to consumers through channels dominated by one way communication (Martinez, Polo, & de Chernatony, 2008). Currently, however, consumers

discover their own brand meanings and communicate these back to organisations (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). Therefore, at a more strategic level, brands can be seen as the main platform used for building relationships with consumers.

The idea that consumers build relationships with brands is recognised in literature (e.g., Fournier, 1998; Aggarwal, 2004; Johnson & Grimm, 2010; Aggarwal & Law, 2005; Aggarwal & Zhang, 2006). However, most of this research was within offline contexts. One of the questions that is increasing research in the marketing fields today is how the role of brands and branding is developing in the digital age. As mentioned in Chapter 1, with new communication technologies comes an issue of the digital divide. One of the major concerns for research on brands and the digital age has been the different levels of Internet experience by users (Bruner & Kumar, 2000). That is, regardless of the Internet's potential for interactive communication, interactive communication experienced online may depend on several factors, such as how users experience and use the Internet (Thompson, Higgins, & Howell, 1994). Bruner and Kumar (2000) state that unlike traditional marketing media, such as television or print, it cannot be expected that the majority of consumers are familiar and experienced with the Internet. Therefore, Internet experience plays an important role in branding success online. This could show that consumers with a wide range of Internet experience would develop online brand relationships without difficulty than consumers with less experience. This is important to note for the scope of this research, however, since the study focuses on *how* brands communicate and not with *whom*; it is the context in which the consumer experiences the brand online that is key.

As mentioned above, currently many organisations are using social networking sites to interact with their consumers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Safko & Brake, 2009), and consumers are communicating back. These online social networks provide opportunities to build a community

where users can form strong relationships with brands. Williamson (2010) proposes that brand presence via social media channels invites consumer attention and familiarity, and allows marketers to target consumers directly. Previous research that has examined online brand communities focused mainly on the context of Facebook (e.g., Neff, 2010; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Meadows-Klue, 2008), however, there is a notable difference between the online brand communities found in sites such as Facebook and those found on Twitter. On Facebook for example, users connect with their friends (boyd and Ellison 2007). By connecting with their friends, they gain access to their friends' content, news and links<sup>6</sup>. Twitter users on the other hand can share information about events or opinions regarding a certain topic to a wider audience, for example, through the use of hashtags, e.g. #BringBackOurGirls, #Diet, to indicate current trends (boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010) (discussed further in Chapter 3). Twitter users can choose what information they want to receive (e.g., news, links) and which brands to follow<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, this research focuses on Twitter to examine how brands communicate with their publics online.

### **Defining Public Relations**

According to Moloney (2000) public relations is often practiced by organisations or groups, but the greatest amount of public relations is conducted on behalf of organisations. Within communication studies research there are prominent discussions about public relations, the way it functions and its purpose. Researchers have claimed that public relations is a very difficult profession to define as there are many definitions to the practice, all of which are equally significant (Harris, 1993). Scholars have defined public relations according to what it does and what it achieves. Most of these definitions point towards the World Assembly of Public Relations Associations' description of public relations, as "the art and social science of analysing

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<sup>6</sup> Parr, B. (2010). Facebook, Twitter and the Two Branches of Social Media. Retrieved: <http://mashable.com/2010/10/11/facebook-twitter-social/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisational leaders, and implementing planned programs of action, which will serve both the organisation and the public interest (cited in Zhao, 2007 p. 624 ). The main reason this description was used was to develop the public relations field as a social science by suggesting that there was a scientific foundation to it. Lubbe and Puth (1994) also provide a definition by the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA), a governing body of public relations practice in South Africa that also follows the above definition. This definition states that “public relations is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics” (Lubbe & Puth, 1994, p. 6). Moloney (2000) also presents public relations as a practice where messages are created to be consumed by the public. Therefore, the primary function of public relations is to ‘message’ and this produces what Moloney (2000) describes as ‘PR effects’, which can be positive or negative. It is important to note that through ‘messaging’, the practice of public relations becomes an art of getting the messages of a person, company or organisation placed in the media. Today, this media includes the Internet and social media.

According to the Public Relations Society of America’s (PRSA) website, public relations helps organisations and their publics adapt mutually to each other<sup>8</sup>. A previous study by Grunig and Hunt (1984) revealed that ‘mutual understanding’ was central to public relations. It is clear, then, that maintaining mutual understanding is what many of the public relations definitions are based on. It has been explained that an important element in achieving this mutual understanding is through a two-way process (Macnamara, 1996; Jefkins, 1986). Wilcox and Nolte (1995) propose one universally recognised definition of public relations that involves this two way communication process. They state that public relations, through two-way communication, supports the building of relationships between the organisation and its various publics. Broom

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<sup>8</sup> PRSA, (2011). Retrieved: [http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/PublicRelationsDefined/#.U3uZQvmSz\\_Q](http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/PublicRelationsDefined/#.U3uZQvmSz_Q)

and Smith (1979) agree with this description as these authors claim that the public relations role acts as a “go-between” or “information mediator” between an organisation and the public (p. 50).

Contrary to the data presented above, which illustrates that public relations is purely a communication function, scholars like Kiranjit (1997) propose that public relations is instead more of a management function. Moore and Kalupa (1985) have also explored this view by saying that the basic objective of public relations is “to measure, analyse and influence public opinion” (p. 65). PRISA provides another definition of the term stating that it is also the management, through communication, of perceptions and strategic relationships between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders (cited in Skinner et al., 2007). Lages and Simkin (2003) hold similar perspectives on public relations. According to them, public relations is a management function because it is often the job of public relations practitioners to ‘manage’ each and every form of communication between the organisation and the public. When analysing the reputational risk of an organisation Scandizzo (2011) provided examples in which communication is often managed, stating that communications practitioners have to ‘manage’ what light the organisation is viewed in from the outside, ‘manage’ what perceptions the public has of the organisation and ‘manage’ fallouts that could result in negative perceptions of the organisation. The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) in England offers a definition that presents this aspect of the practice. According to them public relations “is about reputation, the result of what you do, what you say, and what others say about you”<sup>9</sup>. This means that the public relations practice manages the reputation of an organisation.

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<sup>9</sup> CIPR, (2010). Retrieved: <http://www.cipr.co.uk/content/about-us/about-pr>

In deciding which definition best suited this research, the research by Cutlip et al., (2000), who summarised public relations theory and practice, proved insightful. It is clear that the characteristics of public relations are communication and management; however the research by these authors offered a link between public relations as a communication function and as a management function. They defined public relations as “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics” (Cutlip et al., 2000, p. 6) Similarly, Lages and Lages (2005) referred to the current practice of public relations as the strategic management of communication, aimed at developing relationships between an organisation and its various publics. These definitions clearly identify the link between these two approaches to public relations, and both are a central part of an organisation.

Building from the above definitions the study takes the view that public relations is *the overall communication and management strategy of an organisation and its publics*, and this communication is what is essentially drawn out in the study.

### **The Concept of the Public**

The above section mentioned the idea of the public and publics. The concept of *the public* is relevant in this study in order to understand public relations. According to Livingstone (2005), defining the public is difficult as it can be used to refer to various concepts. For example, while the term public is mainly used to refer to open spaces, it can also be used synonymously with the term audiences. However, when dealing with public relations, the term public is more relevant than the term audience because the concepts in this case are different. Newsom et al., (2004 p. 90) explain that “from a public relations perspective, the term audience suggests a passive audience and this conflicts with the goal of public relations, which is to stimulate strong

audience participation.” Public relations requires two-way communication, therefore the term ‘publics’ results in the question of engagement. As such, Ito (2008) proposes that "publics can be reactors, re-makers and re-distributors, engaging in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange as well as through acts of media reception” (Ito, 2008, p. 2). Though social networks according to boyd (2007) are public spaces and “allow publics to gather” (p. 125), the types of publics that this study focuses on are those who participate with organisations both offline and online, those who Ito (2008) suggests engage in the shared culture of the organisation through communication.

The concept of different publics, as opposed to a mass audience, emerged with the adoption of the relationship building approach (boyd, 2008). Public relations today focuses on this approach, making the term public more appropriate than the term audience in this study, as it is more preferable in a public relations context. In order to fully understand the public relations practice and why it is a focus in the context of this study, a look at the functions and principles that make up the role of the practice is necessary.

### **Role of Public Relations**

Lewis (1977) explains that the role of public relations is to bridge the gap between the organisation and its public by showcasing the organisation’s actions to the public in a way that is favourable, and also finding ways to incorporate the consumers’ feedback. However, the tools and strategies for communicating with customers have changed significantly with the emergence social media. Organisations can now interact directly with publics in a space where feedback is no longer hard to come by or be requested. Social media users collaborate in content creation (Perlmutter, 2008), are proactive in searching for information (Gurau, 2008) and value control in social media participation (Guillory & Sundar, 2008). This is why social media has received

widespread attention in research for the way it strengthens the public relations function (Porter & Sallot, 2005). Even in an online context, Sallot, Porter, and Acosta-Alzuru (2004) discovered that public relations practitioners believe that the use of the Internet has allowed them to improve their roles and promote organisations.

Weinberg (2009) states that with social media, public relations practitioners can promote “websites, products, or services through online social channels and to communicate with and tap into a much larger community” (p. 3). Borgan (2010), mentions that social media offers an opportunity for public relations to deliver what is true to the public relations practice, which is building and maintaining relationships, in addition to offering valuable information. This study focuses on the role of public relations, particularly the role of public relations in brand communication online. Previous literature dating back to the early 1990s shows a limited amount of research in defining public relations roles along these lines. However, recently, from the late 1990s onwards, through the work of James Grunig, for example, Hon and Grunig (1999); Grunig (2008); and Grunig and Dozier (2012), the role of public relations has been explored more specifically in terms of communication and relationship management. These and similar studies have begun to focus on digital communication, particularly the Internet, and how it ties in to the practice of public relations. For example, in South Africa, Naude, Froneman and Atwood (2004) investigated the use of the Internet by ten South African non-governmental organisations in serving their clients via their websites. In Europe, Van Ruler and Verčič (2004) investigated the overall communication management process in European organisations by their CEOs, and in the UAE, Kirat (2007) investigated the use of Internet by public relations departments in reaching their publics online, gathering information and promoting and developing their relations with the news media.

These examples illustrate the growing worldwide public relations research in terms of Internet communication and relationship management. Similar studies are beginning to fill the gaps in public relations literature online, illustrating that as the practice of public relations develops over the years, the role of public relations changes as well.

As this study focuses particularly on South Africa, it is important to note that there is still a growing body of literature to be researched in this context. This is not to conclude that research on public relations in South Africa does not exist, but that many of these studies have focused more specifically on its role in the political sphere of the country, for example, Holtzhausen (2005). Very few studies have researched public relations in commercial organisations, for example Venter (2004), Abratt and Mofokeng (2001), Opoku, Abratt and Pitt (2006) and Mersham and Skinner (2008); however, this body of work also continues to grow. Even fewer studies have been conducted (see Rice & Atkin, 2012) in regards to social media and organisational communication. However, as social media is an ever changing concept, this allows for continued research in this field.

From the above literature, this study has determined two basic roles that define the role of public relations: communication management and relationship management. Detailed explanations of these terms follow:

Communication management: when an organisation forms communication goals that are consistent with their overall objectives. It is essentially the communication by or on behalf of the organisation.

Relationship management: is the role of public relations in recognising who key publics are, and creating ways to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with them (Ledingham,

2003). According to Ledingham (2003) relationship management allows public relations to balance the interests of the organisation and the public.

This study emphasises the communication management and the relationship management function as central to public relations.

### **The History of Public Relations and Propaganda**

Public relations has developed over the years as is evident in the brief literature that follows. Public relations history is developing as an important area of scholarship within the academic discipline of public relations (see Botan & Hazleton, 2006 and Pearson, 1990). Most of the literature around the history of public relations and propaganda lies outside the communication field, for example, Ewen (1996) and Pimlott (1951) researched propaganda in social historical contexts, while Marchand (1998) researched propaganda in relation to business history and Maltese (1992) focused on these views in the political science field to name a few. However, understanding propaganda and public relations is important in the communication field, particularly in an organisational context. This section traces the early advances of public relations in order to understand how the practice and the profession came about.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the practice of public relations was and often still is misused and misunderstood, often being referred to as propaganda. This is important to note as it often leads to the belief that public relations can only be practised in one way or with one set of values. For the purpose of background, a definition of propaganda is provided. Moloney (2006) refers to propaganda as “any communication that aims at influencing the feelings of the members of a particular group towards something” (p. 8) while Nelson (1996) states that “propaganda is defined as a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions,

attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes...” (p. 232). However, while public relations is sometimes described as propaganda, this description is not helpful to the development and understanding of public relations as a form of a communicative practice which promotes for organisational *and* public interests.

Most of the research provided on the history of public relations and propaganda is provided by scholar Jacquie L'Etang. In one of her books she spoke of the conceptual issues and methodological problems in defining public relations as propaganda, as well as in trying to separate the two terms (L'Etang, 2006). However, as the negative associations with propaganda grew, the term ‘public relations’ was used to describe essentially the same thing. This is because, both practices have similar roles; they both involve a persuasion of the public to some extent or the other. Therefore, it is often assumed, even today, that any public relations tactic is an effort by organisations to manipulate the media to gain publicity for their products, causes or clients. However, Weaver, et al., (2006) found a simple way to draw differences between the two practices. They state that propaganda operates counter to the public interest and public relations works for the public interest. For example, in South Africa, the introductions of professional bodies that represent the industry, e.g. PRISA, function with the requirement of honest and ethical behaviour to serve the public interest. PRISA in their mandate state that ‘all registered members of PRISA must commit themselves to adhere to the Institute’s Code of Ethics & Professional Standards.’ In this code, section 2.4 states:

We are committed to ethical practices, preservation of public trust, and the pursuit of communication excellence with powerful standards of performance, professionalism, and ethical conduct (PRISA, 2011).

And in section 2.7:

We have a positive duty to maintain integrity and accuracy, as well as generally accepted standards of good taste (PRISA, 2011).

Furthermore, the definitions provided above emphasise that propaganda entails only asymmetrical communication, one-sided communication, and does not take into consideration the recipient's point of view. In contrast public relations activities can involve both the use of symmetric and asymmetric interaction and strive to reach mutual understanding, as referenced by Grunig and Hunt (1984) in their models of public relations (Heath, 2009; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

### ***Background***

Pratkanis and Aronson (1992, p. 8) state that the term propaganda “did not see widespread use until the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was used to describe the persuasion tactics employed during World War I, and those later used by totalitarian regimes.” Harrison (2003) states that since then, governments and other organisations have seen the value in communicating with their publics to gain support for their goals. They want to reach its power for purposes of publicizing their products and services. Essentially, like the government, businesses too, had to pay attention to their ‘publics’. As this study draws on key public relations academics such as Grunig and Hunt (1984), looking at how public relations developed in the West is important. Igben (1997), states that “the historical foundations of public relations has one significant focus, and that is the recognition of the role of public opinion” (p.81).

For the scope of this study, public opinion is an important factor to note when discussing the history of public relations. This is because the ways in which the public both act and react towards an organisation often depend on their opinion of the organisation. Most of the academic studies on public relations and public opinion are provided by Edward Bernays, and Walter

Lippmann. Bernays (1928) sees propaganda as the ‘manipulation’ of public opinion and it is in this context that people saw propaganda as providing a means of manufacturing public opinion and controlling the masses (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). Lippmann’s (1922) view is that the news media is our window to the world outside of our own experiences, and they determine our opinion of the world. Essentially, what we read, hear and see in the media shapes our opinion on certain matters. Most of what Lippmann (1922) and Bernays (1928) referred to was political in nature, however, their theories and assumptions on public opinion applies to organisations too, particularly today with the abundance of new media technologies. For example, Brown (2009) observes that today social media has allowed people the power of ‘direct publishing’ online that was never available previously. This has led to a shift in favour of ordinary users. This means that a greater number of people can now engage online. Businesses need to be at the forefront in order to manage their reputations and create a favourable public opinion.

Mitrook, Popescu and Kiouisis (2007) provide a good analysis on understanding the influence of public opinion on an organisation’s reputation. Their study highlights two key communication factors that they linked with an organisation’s reputation, namely, public relations activities and its coverage in the media, and therefore conclude that public relations influences public opinion. Consequently, one of the major reasons of the growth of modern public relations was the growing awareness of public opinion. The studies of public opinion in South Africa are always directly related to the government (see for example Mattes & Thiel, 1998; Mattes, 2002; Ashforth, 1990). Few studies are related to organisations. However it is important for organisations to take note of public opinion. After World War I and II, international organisations fast learned the value of gaining public favour through professional public relations. They also learned the value publicity can give them in terms of attracting new customers (Moloney, 2000).

The above discussion briefly describes the public relations practice, its role and some of its challenges. The following section briefly reviews the literature surrounding public relations in South Africa.

### **Public Relations in South Africa**

Previous literature, see for example Rensburg (2002), illustrates that the development of public relations as an established practice in the business industry in South Africa has not yet been documented or thoroughly researched. The limited public relations literature in South Africa has also been noted by Van Leuven and Pratt (1996) to be a result of the increasing marginalisation that Africa, as a continent, has experienced in actively contributing to academic literature. These authors argue that often countries in Africa are not mentioned in textbooks as a part of the global village. Studies that mention Africa generally focus on the need for the development of communication in Africa (Van Leuven & Pratt, 1996). It is this exclusion in previous public relations studies to the African continent that makes South Africa (along with other African countries) ideal research studies. Research that has been conducted on South Africa, for example, Mersham and Skinner (1998), Rensburg (2002) and Holthausen et al., (2003), revealed the complex and diverse nature of the country. These studies illustrate how this complex and diverse nature of the country strongly influences the way in which public relations is practiced (Rensburg, 2002). That is, the political, social and economic, cultural and developmental issues in the country makes South Africa the ideal field site for researching the way public relations is practised.

Lubbe and Puth (1994), similar to Cullingworth (1990) credited the development of public relations in South Africa to the PRISA that was established in 1957. As a result of this

organisational body as well as the social, political, cultural and economic issues in the country, public relations practitioners in South Africa were given the opportunity to explore public relations practices developed in the South African context (see Lubbe & Puth, 1994; Holtzhausen, Peterson & Tindall, 2003). As Patel, Xavier and Broom (2005) state, an organisation is connected to its environment by publics, so understanding the environment and changes within the publics' environment can be crucial for an organisation's survival. As the focus of public relations is to promote communication between the organisation and the public, it aligns itself with the open systems approach. Literature provided by Lubbe and Puth (1994) show that there are two major approaches that can be taken when reviewing the historical development of public relations in South Africa. They first mention a *systems approach*, and the second is a *structural approach*. However, in this study only the systems approach is analysed because it is most relevant to the study (for the role it plays in understanding the South African environment). The systems approach is also highlighted by Baskin and Aranoff (1998) and Cutlip, Center and Broom (1985), and it illustrates the growing opportunities of the practice in relation to the political, social, and economic development of the country.

### **The systems approach**

Discussions of the early history of public relations are discussed mostly from the systems approach (Holtzhausen & Verwey, 1996). Angelopulo (1994) and Holtzhausen and Verwey (1996) are among the notable authors to describe this approach as one of the most successful approaches to public relations communication and management, adding that it is also the most important theoretical approach to public relations. These findings prioritise the systems approach as essential to the present research on public relations because it follows the notion that organisations should concern themselves with the environment in order to survive (Holtzhausen & Verwey, 1996). The environment is always changing and in turn organisations must adapt and

evolve. One of the major changes in today's environment is largely credited to technology, the Internet and new media.

Through the media, organisations exist by accepting inputs from publics, and transforming them into outputs. It then receives feedback from those outputs and adjusts accordingly, therefore developing a positive feedback loop (POI, 2009). It is this feedback function that illustrates the relevance of the systems approach to public relations. Public relations assumes this role of strengthening relations between an organisation and their sub-systems, whether internal or external. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations emphasise the feedback roles of public relations within organisations.

Furthermore, the systems approach is relevant to studying South Africa as academic literature. Holtzhausen et al., (2003) show that based on the economic, social, and political realities of the country (explained in detail below), organisations have been finding ways to communicate through their social realities, however many continue to follow Western based premises. The social realities of the country take into account culture, and although several countries worldwide have a variety of cultures, this study began with a basic premise that South Africa is one of the most culturally rich countries in the world. Finestone and Snyman (2006) argue that what differentiates South Africa from other culturally diverse countries is the fact that the country aims to celebrate each culture individually. The discussion of communication models in public relations is necessary while reviewing the literature to understand the public relations practice. However as mentioned, many of the communication models to date follow a Western style of thinking (e.g. Grunig and Hunt's four models of public relations). Despite the fact that Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models were based on Western mentality, this study employs

them here, in a South African context as they are equally appropriate for the purposes of reaching the current research objectives.

### **Communication Models of Practice**

The most referenced piece of public relations work is the textbook by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) entitled, *Managing Public Relations*. In this book they present four models of public relations. As mentioned earlier in this study, these models are (1) the press agency model, (2) the public information model, (3) the two-way asymmetrical model, and (4) the two-way symmetrical model. Countless studies on international public relations have since used these models to understand and describe the practice of public relations. However, in reviewing the literature it was found that little research has been conducted to explore how Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models could be used to analyse online communication - this research provides such an analysis and will be considered in Chapter 3 of this study together with a detailed explanation of the models.

Not only has research challenged these models' usefulness in online communication, Motion and Leitch, (2001) question whether these models are useable across different cultures. Their argument is that models that are grounded in an analysis of international history and that form a uniform model for public relations practices all around the world will reduce cultural differences in the public relations practice. Other authors for example, Cancel et al., (1997) provide literature to support these claims as they also state that, "the practice of public relations is too complex, too fluid, and impinged by far too many variables for the academy to force it into the four boxes known as the four models of public relations" (p. 32). A study by Sriramesh et al., (1999) in India, South Korea, and Japan found that Grunig and Hunt's models only described some of the public relations practices in these countries. Pratt and Ugboajah's (1985) study

compared public relations models in Nigeria, Canada, and the United States, and also found that the use of the models differed. These authors found that practitioners in developing countries were more likely to use certain models such as the press agency and public information models, whereas, international countries were more likely to use the two-way asymmetrical and the two-way symmetrical models. Following these studies, this research will add to the existing literature in determining which models are best suited to the South African context.

Grunig and White (1992) stated that worldviews determined which public relations model would be used. Holtzhausen et al., (2003) also sought to describe public relations practices to the dominant worldviews in specific countries. Kearney (1984) defined worldview as “a set of images and assumptions about the world” (p. 10) that usually determined how different people thought about themselves and their environments. In this regard, understanding the worldview that South Africa holds is important towards understanding public relations communication in South Africa as well as what models would be best suited in their practice. To understand this worldview, one has to understand the South African situation. A brief overview of the current South African political, social and economic situation follows below. The aim of this overview is to place the research in context and not to give an exhaustive description of the practices being followed in the country.

## **Understanding the South African Environment**

### ***Social***

Firstly, the South African population and its diversity need to be examined. According to the mid-year population estimates for South Africa 2014<sup>10</sup>, provided by the government, 80.2% of the population is Black (43.33 million of the estimated 54 million), 8.4% is White (4.55 million),

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<sup>10</sup> Stats SA, 2014. Mid-year population estimates for 2014.

8.8% is Coloured (4.77 million) and 2.5% are Asians/Indians (1.34 million)<sup>11</sup>. These race groups are also further divided into language groups (primarily based on origin). Most of the White population is Afrikaans-speaking (Dutch origin) or English-speaking (British origin)<sup>12</sup>. Among the Black population, there are nine dominant ethnic groups: Zulu, Xhosa, South Sotho, North Sotho, Tswana, Venda, Ndebele, Swazi and Tsonga (Statistics SA, 2014). This diverse population has led to South Africa having eleven official languages. In the business sector, it is argued that English is primarily used, followed by Afrikaans. Research around the social structure of the South African republic, such as the well-known analyses of Attwell (1993), has found that for an extremely diverse population with many different cultural groups within it, communication can be difficult. For example, Holtzhausen et al., (2003) state that the fact that South Africa has eleven official languages could negatively impact practitioners' ability to use the two models that rely heavily on writing skills - the press agency and public information models. However, these findings may translate differently online as opposed to their use within organisational contexts.

### ***Political***

To understand the political situation in South Africa, one needs to look at the history of the country. Scholars such as Wolpe (1972), Sisk (1995), Heugh (2000) and Comaroff (2013) describe the high levels of social tension in the country due to Apartheid. Until 1994, South Africa was controlled by Whites that instituted Apartheid. Wolpe (1972) describes Apartheid as entailing a large increase in White domination through the extension of the repressive powers of the State. Even though Louw (2004) states that Apartheid was based on the notion of political divides and not white supremacy, incorporated into the discussion is always the idea of race (see Henrard, 2002). Terms such as, 'racial segregation', or 'racial discrimination' and 'racial groups'

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

(usually, black or coloured) are the concepts used to analyse Apartheid in South Africa. This is possibly because the laws created during that time were very restrictive causing non-Whites to be oppressed by the government (Sisk, 1995). In other words, it was White South Africans that dominated the political economy of South Africa. Apartheid brought with it a racial division of labour and a marginalisation of African societies. It is argued by authors such as Marais (2001) that this environment was geared towards restructuring the social and economic basis for capital accumulation. 1994 symbolised not only the end of Apartheid but the end of the dominant alliance of social, economical and political forces in South Africa. However, Marais (2001) states that South Africa remains in the midst of a renewed struggle that favours the most powerful and privileged sections of society. In relation to business, Thomas and Bendixen (2000) note that South Africa is largely controlled by English-speaking businesses and Afrikaans-speaking businesses. However, it is important to note that the equality in the economic playfield is in progress, with Black empowerment actions such as BEE (Black Economic Empowerment), a programme launched by the South African government to restore the damages done by Apartheid by giving certain previously disadvantaged groups economic privileges previously unavailable to them (Spierenburg & Wels, 2004).

### ***Economic***

As mentioned earlier, there is very little data on South Africa in international public relations literature (Van Leuven and Pratt, 1996), and with this limited public relations literature, the communications infrastructure in the country has gone somewhat unnoticed. According to De Beer and Mersham (2004) and Skinner and Von Essen (1991), the rise in South Africa's communication ability has partly driven the public relations practice during the post-apartheid period. Alden and Soko (2005) examine and describe the early 1990s in South Africa as having one of the highest rising markets in Africa to which Holtzhausen, et al., (2003) call "Africa's largest economy" (p. 312). Freitag and Stokes (2009) also argue that South Africa is the leading

power in Africa, and statistics compiled by Statistics South Africa (2014) provide evidence to this notion as the country's estimated *Gross Domestic Product* (GDP) in 2014 of R874 billion for the first quarter of 2014 was the highest in Africa (Stats SA, 2014; Country List/South Africa).

So what influence does this diversity have on business communication practices in South Africa? In relation to public relations, Adler (2002), states that culture determines the public relations communication model towards employees, the organisation's external environment and relationships among people. As mentioned above, Holtzhausen et al., (2003) and Grunig and White (1992) linked public relations communication practices to dominant worldviews, stating that worldviews determined which public relations communication model would be used.

### **Communication Models of Practice in the South African Context**

Steyn and Sonn (1992) identified two competing worldviews that exist in South African communication: *Eurocentric* and *Afrocentric*. Hart (2010) defines a *Eurocentric* worldview as one that often seeks to show the dominance of Western customs in other cultures. Kambon and Bowen-Reid (2010) define an *Afrocentric* worldview as one that "superimposes the European worldview as the conceptual framework" (p. 90), while emphasising African history, culture and development. According to Mbigi (1977) this approach emphasises the importance of African people and can play a role in building relationships through building a spirit of harmony and reconciliation. The *Ubuntu model*, provided by Holtzhausen et al., (2003), supports this approach as it speaks of harmony and reconciliation in the workplace. The term *Ubuntu* is derived from the Zulu saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning 'a person is a person through other persons' or 'I am, because of others'. It is important to highlight the various types of communication, however, in spite of the different cultures and races in South Africa, Van

Leuven and Pratt (1996) provide a body of work that shows that business practices in the country tend to be firmly rooted in Western traditions. An exploration of the Eurocentric worldview in South African communication is provided in the literature below.

### **A Eurocentric/Western dialogic model of public relations**

Previous work from Finestone and Snyman, (2005) viewed the Eurocentric approach as the dominant style of management in South Africa. Similarly, Prime's (1999) study also revealed that South African organisations are dominated by an ethnocentric approach in which the view that 'my way is the best way' dominates. These authors argue that the dominance of this approach in the country is due to the impact of apartheid. Holtzhausen et al., (2003), similar to the Eurocentric approach, designed the 'Western dialogic model' of communication as one of the possible communication models of public relations practice in South Africa. These authors along with Pratt and Adamolekun, (2008) and Mersham and Skinner (2009) all explain that the Western-based practices were developed by the social, political, and cultural freedom in the country, therefore being a powerful influence. These findings correlate with communication *within* organisations; however, this model of South African communication has not been thoroughly researched in relation to organisational communication and relationship building in the online context. This study will provide the necessary literature in determining whether this Eurocentric approach to communication in the South African business environment holds the same in an online environment. This viewpoint has contributed to many public relations practices and will be referred to in the discussion of this study. These theories will be used as the base of the study, particularly in answering research questions 1 and 3, namely, how do commercial brands in South Africa use Twitter as a communication tool? And how can these commercial brands build relationships with their publics by using Twitter?

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explored surrounding literature and research findings in the public relations field. These sections explored brands and branding, a definition of public relations was offered, public relations roles and practices were highlighted, and the chapter explored public relations practice internationally together with public relations practice within a South African context. Furthermore, within this literature, communication models of practice were discussed. The literature review presented gaps in previous public relations studies, such as the limited research on public relations in South Africa, particularly the limited research on public relations practices in an online context. The following chapter presents the literature and key research findings on social media in addition to an examination of the new media and social media landscape in South Africa (particularly as it pertains to the field of public relations).

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **SOCIAL MEDIA- BACKGROUND & LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

Previous literature surrounding the public relations practice and the rise of new media suggests that the communications field, more specifically the public relations industry, has witnessed a big change over the last few years (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 2013; Anderson, 2009; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). With social media being one of the biggest changes in communication (Shirky, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Qualman, 2012) it has garnered the attention of academics and researchers around the world, which has led to the publication of a number of works, such as ones focusing on Twitter (Micek & Whitlock, 2008) Facebook (Alba & Stay, 2008), and YouTube (Miller, 2011). With the increasing popularity of social media, the rules for brands have changed. Organisations now have an opportunity to engage more actively and build mutually beneficial relationships with publics online. This chapter defines and discusses relevant theories of social media and social networking in detail. The literature reviewed in this chapter includes of research surrounding social media in general, social media and organisations, and social media and public relations. While doing so, the literature review will also focus more narrowly on the research related to this study, that is, Twitter and Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations.

#### **The Rise of Digital Media**

According to Bernoff and Li (2008) organisations are used to being in control. They usually create products, services and marketing messages based on their own views of what people want. Currently however, many consumers are taking matters into their own hands (Bernoff & Li, 2008). Given the freedom by online social technologies such as social networking sites, consumers are now defining their own perspectives on organisations and brands, a view that at

many times is different from the image the brand wants to show. Therefore, in order for organisations to influence how they are seen, they have to participate in this online environment. It is important to understand the implications of this shift.

The rise of digital and social media has been widely documented throughout communication studies. Researchers such as Newman (2009), Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) and Livingstone and Brake (2010) explain that the way in which people communicate today has significantly changed from how people communicated in the past. These studies show how the new media environment has in some ways disrupted the traditional role of the media. According to Webster and Ksiazek (2012, p. 39), “one of the most widely observed consequences of the growth in digital media is audience fragmentation.” These authors continue to suggest that as more choices are available ‘on-demand’, the forms of consumption become more widely distributed. This happens when traditional media, such as the television, expand or when newer media, such as the Internet and/or social media enter the competition. For example, in South Africa in the year 2000 there were only about thirteen magazine titles distributed throughout the country (ABC 2000; cited in Milne & Taylor, 2006). This changed dramatically in 2005 when around 350 magazine titles were being distributed in the country every month (Milne & Taylor, 2006). By 2008 it had increased by 2.7% with the addition of fifteen new titles (MediaOnline, 2008) and between the years 2012-2013, publishers continued to experiment with new titles, with the launch of at least 3 more magazines in both years (Horsten, 2013). In broadcasting, MultiChoice (South Africa’s subscription television services) continues to add new channels to its various DSTV (Digital Satellite TV services) bouquets and existing channels are dividing and multiplying. For example, both M-Net Series and kykNET have been divided into three different platforms<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Smuts, R. 2013. The impact of fragmentation of TV Audiences / The Rise of Digital. Retrieved: <http://rmsmedia.co.za/fragmentation-of-tv/>

Essentially, the rise of digital media is a reflection of a much wider change in society. Changes are occurring in the way people use the media channels that have been available for many years. Organisations, brands and public relations practitioners must understand these changes and how to adapt to them. With newspapers and magazines evolving online, and TV and radio taking shape to involve more user-generated content two things are happening. The first is that there are more direct routes for organisations to market their brands. Secondly and most related is that their content strategy has needed to develop to involve more engagement with publics (Brown, 2009). It is essentially the rise of the Internet that has given rise to all of these changes. Researchers such as Meyer (2006) have identified that the Internet has caused a shift in communication since the use of e-mail. At one level it provides a platform that allows traditional media channels to shift their content online and reach different audiences. On another level it provides a variety of new media platforms creating a space in which the consumer and the brand can interact. Essentially, the Internet has become a communication tool that is fast becoming the preferred method through which people access television, radio and newspaper content among other things. With this outlook, Rosenstiel (2005) says it is ‘unsurprising’ for new media to gain popularity.

However, with increasing choice often comes declining numbers (Brown, 2009). According to South African journalist Zweli Mogkata<sup>14</sup>, in the third quarter of 2013, the total South African magazine circulation fell 7.6% (20.1 million from 21.9 million), based on a report by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC, 2013 cited in Mogkata, 2013). Consumer magazines fell 12% to 6.05 million and business-to-business magazines fell 8.1%, to 1.15m, in the year<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, in the U.S. Domingo and Heinonen (2008) along with Barthelemy et al., (2011) state that the print

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<sup>14</sup> Mogkata, Z. (2013). Retrieved: <http://www.financialmail.co.za/mediaadvertising/2013/12/19/magazines-circulation-down-revenue-growing>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

industry is suffering due to readership habits changing and access to more free news and information on the Internet. This includes the fact that South Africans are using mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets to access more content (as mentioned in Chapter 1). This is evidenced through current statistics from South Africa's Social Media Landscape 2014 report, which shows that there are around 14.3 million smartphones being used in South Africa. As a result, organisations are going mobile to access more readers. Examples of this are also given through the creation of mobile applications (apps), specifically for use on smartphones and tablets to access specific content and the building of mobi-sites (mobile sites, websites built to work on mobile phones), to ensure that websites are readable through mobile phones. For example, Cosmopolitan Magazine SA has recently tailored its website to be compatible on mobile phones. Other brands such as Ster Kinekor cinema and Mr Price clothing store have created apps, along with mobile friendly websites, to make their services more accessible to users.

It is an obvious fact that brands and organisations have realised that their target audiences are becoming increasingly fragmented, causing a need to continue to reach audiences in these spaces. Gross et al., (2002) Manasian (2003) and Turow and Kavenaugh (2003), have mentioned that since 2002, the Internet and related technologies like mobile phones and hand-held computers have changed the daily lives of individuals.

The above literature highlights the change in communication due to the Internet and social media. However, social media is the focus. Livingstone and Brake's (2010) study showed that social media provides large benefits in terms of communication and relationships. The adoption of social media sites within the business environment is known as 'social business'. According to Herrmann (2012) the social business idea centres on engaging, collaborating, and connecting

with consumers, employees and other interested parties. The author further states that by engaging, collaborating, and connecting with the public, real business value is achieved. Baird and Parasnis (2011) and Chu and Kim (2011) state that with social media people are relying on friends' recommendations about brands and other things, and since these discussions are taking place in social channels, brands need to be aware of these opportunities to speak back. These authors argue that if brands and organisations engage with users and provide exciting content for them, they will have an opportunity to provide value to their consumers in terms of interaction beyond making a sale (Baird & Parasnis, 2011; Chu & Kim, 2011). Essentially, having a social business goes further than an organisation simply saying their consumers are important to them. Instead, it requires them to show this by building genuine and authentic relationships with them and engaging in two-way conversations.

If one considers the large numbers of people using social media the importance of examining social media as a public relations tool cannot be ignored, but first a definition of social media and social networks is provided below.

### **Defining Social Media**

In Chapter 1 a brief definition was given for social media. It was described by Livingstone (2008) as online platforms where individuals can create content, access information, inform and be informed by others in the same network. However, there are many definitions for social media and Jacka and Scott (2011) argue that "there is no single recognised definition of social media" (p.5). According to these authors, the fast growth of technology means that the term 'social media' continues to change every day as new websites and online tools and content continue to emerge. Nevertheless, many studies have provided their own definition and will be presented below.

Even though Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) recognised the difficulty of defining social media, the authors developed their own definition and argued that social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (p. 61). Lee et al., (2012) argue that while Kaplan and Haenlein’s (2010) definition is the most cited, it neglects to address social media’s ability build and manage relationships, as well as its ability to enable dialogue across a variety of channels. As this study focuses on public relations communication, the interactive and social characteristics of social media are important. Research by Levenshus (2010) and Sweetser (2010) has shown that social media is useful for forming and building relationships, which makes these aspects important in defining social media. Drawing on Kaplan and Haenlein’s (2010) definition, Smith (2010) defined social media as “virtual platforms for interactivity and information exchange ...” (p. 330). Similarly, Margo’s (2012) research focuses on the ‘interactivity’ and ‘participation’ aspects of social media as she states that they have provided users with the ability to connect to each other based on common interests, as well as create communities to socialise and to share information.

Kavanaugh et al., (2012), much like the authors above, describe social media as a tool used to assist various forms of social interaction. As discussed in previous sections, communication is traditionally thought of as being one-way or two-way, but social media platforms allow users to communicate with each other at the same time and in multiple directions (Thackeray & Neiger, 2009). These definitions of social media surrounding social interaction are specifically applicable to the study of public relations, and so, this study will follow these definitions paying particular attention to the social interaction function and information exchange. It is also important to note that social media will be used in this study as an umbrella term that includes social networking sites.

## Social Networking

Kaplan and Heanlein (2010), Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent (2007) and Houghton (2012) (to mention a few), have provided discussions about the different types of social media. These media, such as blogs, social networking sites and “other text based collaboration formats” (Kaplan & Heanlein, 2010, p. 63), are becoming a big part of media consumption for Internet users. Social networks in particular are provided by the *Universal McCann Wave 3* report<sup>16</sup> as being the reason for the growth in social media. From the early 2000s onwards, researchers’ attention turned to online social networks (see Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003; Greve & Salaff, 2003). Much of this research attempted to understand *what* people do in online spaces, that is, what attracts them, what influences them, how they express themselves, and why some would rather observe than participate (boyd, 2007; Lim et al., 2012; Cosley et al., 2010; boyd & Ellison, 2007).

According to Kaplan and Heanlein (2010), social networking sites are “applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other” (p. 63). A more comprehensive analysis of social networks is provided by boyd and Ellison (2007) who argue that social networking sites allow people to do three things: 1) “construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system”, 2) “articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection”, and 3) “view and negotiate their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). Similarly, Kim et al., (2010) list the important features of social networking as - forming online connections, updating and using personal profiles, contributing to online groups, interacting with users online, expressing and sharing opinions and

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, T (2008). Universal McCann Wave 3 Report, Retrieved: <http://universalmccann.com.au/global/knowledge/view?Id=230>

lastly finding information. The core element as seen in boyd and Ellison's (2007) analysis as well as Kim et al., (2010) is the 'connections' that people are able to make online. With this in mind, it seems fitting to study social networks that allow for increased interactivity between people.

There are also a number of studies that attempt to understand *how* people communicate through these social networks. Hampton et al., (2011) did a Pew Internet Research study, a study conducted on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping Americans Internet use through surveys, that explored the role of technology in people's lives, and as Hampton et al.'s (2011) research shows, social networks have given users the opportunity to come together online and share information, ideas, and resources. Essentially, social networks offer a likeness to society, and create interaction platforms between both people and technology (Hampton et al., 2011).

### **Impact of Social Networking on Communication**

Based on the above literature, it is evident that social networking is transforming social interaction. Various studies have been conducted on the impact of social networking on communication. Haythornthwaite (2005), for example, explores the impact of communication media and Internet connectivity between people. The research follows that media use has an effect on creating stronger or weaker ties between people. Bargh and Mckenna (2004) also examine the effects of new media use on the user's psychological well-being. In their research, among other things, these authors explore how people form and maintain personal relationships via social media. Such research is important for the present study because while they focus on personal relationships it provides opportunities for researchers and other studies to explore business-to-business relationships, as well as business-to public-relations and seeing how they are created and maintained. Regarding business and social media, Solis (2008) states:

Social media is no longer an option or debatable. It is critically important to all businesses. It represents a powerful, and additional, channel to first listen to customers, stakeholders, media, bloggers, peers, and other influencers, and in turn, build two-way paths of conversations to them. Yes, conversations are taking place about your company, product, and service, right now, with or without you. This represents priceless opportunities to build relationships and shape perceptions at every step. In the process, you become a resource to the very people looking for leadership, expertise, vision and solutions (pg. 6).

There is a significant body of research that focuses on the use of social networks in the business world, Greve and Salaff (2003) and Zhou et al., (2007) are two examples. Research, particularly in social networking and business, is growing. Tapscott and Williams (2006) state that this is because the way people participate on social networks is changing the way many organisations practice. That is, in an environment where organisations are no longer able to control their media messages, the consumer experience holds a huge significance (as mentioned earlier). One of the most important aspects of social networking by organisations was noted by Bernoff and Li (2008) who showed that social networks have allowed organisations to increase their knowledge on their publics as well as their competition. However, there is still a considerable amount of research to be done in the social networking and business context, particularly in South Africa.

### **Social Networking and Business**

Papasolomou and Melanthiou (2012) argue that the development of social media has caused organisations to move past solely maintaining a website for simple “transactional purposes and traditional promotion” and are instead altering their communication in order to “interact with customers for more long term relationships” (p. 320). Chen (2011) and Vollmer and Precourt (2008) also agree that social networking creates opportunities for businesses to connect, share, and become visible.

The existing literature on social media/social networking and organisations encompasses a range of topics such as consumer interaction and the building of relationships, (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Baird & Parasnis, 2011), social networking *within* organisations, (Cross & Parker, 2004; Bennett et al., 2010) and the best practices of business communication (Shih, 2009). However as noted earlier, most of the existing literature on social media and business includes research focused on social media use *within* organisational settings. For example, Baker (2000) focuses on the use of social networks in managerial relationship building. Such research highlights that online communication by organisations did not only take-off with the rise of Web 2.0, which is the term given to describe a second generation of the Internet that is focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online. Rather, this research shows that the practice has been around for decades. Baker’s (2000) research showed the importance of social communication in organisations via e-mail as they found that it did not only speed up information exchange, but it also led to the exchange of new information. Similar research was conducted much earlier by Garton and Wellman (1993), who studied the ways in which e-mail shapes, and is shaped by organisational structures and processes. Their research found that people using e-mail tend to produce more diverse opinions and better decisions. They revealed that e-mail increases access to new people and provides access to information.

From the above examples it is clear that one of the most important aspects of organisational communication is information sharing. More examples of previous research including Seltzer and Mitrook (2007), Bortree and Seltzer (2009), Chu and Yim (2011) and Livingstone and Brake (2010) have also shown that organisations do not often use social networking sites to create dialogue. Instead, their focus is on information sharing. For example, Waters et al., (2009) and Paris et al., (2010) who all studied Facebook, illustrate how frequently Facebook has been used by organisations to relay and share information instead of actually engaging in conversations

with their publics. However, this research follows and highlights that social networks can be major tools of discussion regarding organisational communication. Essentially, social network communication provides opportunities for organisations to engage in relationship building. The research by Gummesson (2008) and Weber (2007) shows that social media and social networking are influential in that they can be used to create a network of relationships which this study aims to explore. Carter (2009) (cited in Pappasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012) believes that ‘going social’ is one of the best ways to form relationships and share, collaborate and create content.

However, research by Ashford (2011) revealed that despite social networks opportunities for interactivity, in the very early stages organisations were slow to take advantage of this feature. Kietzmann et al., (2011) argue that organisations were slow to adapt to social media and social networking because “they don’t understand what it is, the various forms it can take, and how to engage with it and learn” (p. 241). Brothers et al., (2011) illustrate this point by showing that businesses used to ask themselves “What are we going to get out of this?” Instead, of asking, “How can we be helpful” (p. 129). Stephen Abram (2011) believes that organisations are like ‘social animals’ and challenged them to find ways for social media to enhance what they do and brand themselves. Despite this, there are also claims that show businesses taking on social media and social networking with ease and are beginning to develop a strong online presence. For example, in 2013 the top 10 South African brands on Facebook were drawn up. The list is as follows<sup>17</sup>:

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<sup>17</sup> Bronkhorst, Q. (2013). Top SA brands on Facebook. Retrieved: <http://businesstech.co.za/news/internet/17064/top-sa-brands-on-facebook/1346057044000/>

**Figure 1**

1	MXit
2	Vodacom
3	WOOLWORTHS SA
4	FNB
5	BlackBerry South Africa
6	Mr Price
7	AXE South Africa
8	Soul Candi Records
9	YDE
10	Doritos SA

These brands were seen to have a strong online presence (with a large following). Therefore, despite the fact that previous literature suggests a lack of organisations' online presence it is examples like the above that this study draws on, showing that in more recent years brands are beginning to develop strong online presences. Other research, for example, Hennig-Thurau, et al., (2010) and Wilson (2009), also illustrate that businesses are in fact using social networking tools in order to engage more with their consumers. Lenhart et al., (2010) show that due to the adoption of social media by the public at large, there has been a growing use of social media strategies by businesses seeking to reap the benefits. Other researchers such as Kietzmann et al., (2011), and Waters et al., (2009) by way of example, explain the way in which Facebook expanded its registration process to include organisations in 2006. Given the relatively easy access to social communication more than 4000 organisations joined Facebook within two weeks (Waters et al., 2009; Facebook, 2006). Building on similar findings, the study will explore

whether organisational communication in South Africa indeed emphasise community around their brands in order to build these relationships or simply advertise their product and news marketing.

Social networking is essentially provided as a useful tool for businesses, as the shown above. Examples provided by Hawn (2009) and Kist (2008) support this conclusion. Hawn (2009) gives examples of healthcare organisations that found that social networks give them better opportunities to listen and respond to patient needs and “allows for richer engagement and deeper doctor-patient relationships” (p. 368). Kist (2008) provides an example of students and teachers in educational settings developing trust and understanding through the use of social networks. In 2009, Barnes and Mattson conducted a study that found social media being important to the business practice and other marketing or public relations strategies. Results from their study found that most of the Fortune 500 companies in the United States were using Facebook (87%), Twitter (71%), blogs (61%) and online video (44%). It was also found that the use of social networking sites differed depending on what the organisation was trying to communicate (Barnes & Mattson, 2009) .

From the above literature, this research supports the fact that social media and social networking provide public relations practitioners, organisations and brands with an opportunity to build brand awareness, and spread messages that achieve mutually beneficial relationships through two-way communication. However, how and if this is achieved in the South African context through Twitter is explored in the discussion chapters of this study. Kietzmann et al., (2011) use a honeycomb framework that defines and examines social media. This framework is explained below to broadly unpack social media use and its implications for public relations practitioners and organisations.

## **Honeycomb framework of social media**

As social media encompasses a variety of aspects, Kietzmann et al., (2011) provided the Honeycomb Framework to help break social media into seven elements. These are: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups. These elements were created to help organisations understand the different aspects of social media and how these tools can be used in their strategies. Kietzmann et al., (2011) describe each block as follows:

*Identity:* (The extent to which users reveal themselves) is said to be a balance between sharing an organisations' identity and protecting their privacy with the use of different social media. For example the identity block allows organisations to form their brands' identity through sharing pictures and information on social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook.

*Conversations:* (The extent to which users communicate with each other) allows organisations to monitor conversations. According to Kietzmann et al., (2011), understanding and monitoring conversations also involves an understanding of the audiences' needs when engaging with organisations. Social media is intended to support conversations between individuals and groups. Organisations and practitioners, therefore, need to understand the difference between the kinds of conversations that can be had online, such as whether they need to be short and speedy for sites such as Twitter or long and detailed, which blogs require.

*Sharing:* (The extent to which users distribute, exchange and receive information) involves the need for organisations to assess what they have in common with their publics. Similarly, they are required to identify new ways that they can join conversations on these shared interests.

Kietzmann et al., (2011) state that without this shared interest, social media would only be about connections between people without anything actually connecting them together.

*Presence:* (The extent to which users know whether others are accessible) requires organisations to pay attention to their public's availability and location. With all public relations campaigns, organisations need to make decisions about the suitability of particular media strategies and the relevance of different channels (Brown, 2009). Kietzmann et al., (2011) mention that organisations should ask themselves whether their publics prefer to engage in real-time or not. Figuring this out allows organisations to choose a social media platform that reflects this, such as the choice of Twitter and Facebook chat, over blogging or updating information via Google +.

*Relationships:* (The extent to which users relate to each other) requires organisations to understand the social media presence provided by different social media platforms. Building relationships online is therefore influenced by the intimacy of the platform. For example, social networks such as such as Facebook and LinkedIn only allow users to talk to the people they are connected to, whereas a social network like Twitter allows users to connect to other users even if they are not connected to them.

*Reputation:* (The extent to which users know the social standing of others in a social media setting) requires organisations to pay attention to the strength (the number of times you are mentioned); sentiment (the ratio of mentions that are positive to those that are negative); passion (how often certain users talk about you); and reach (the number of different users talking about you divided by the total number of times you are mentioned). Reputation varies depending on the social media site. For example, in LinkedIn the user can build a reputation by getting endorsements and recommendations from other users. On YouTube, reputation can mean the

number of views and the amount of ratings a user gets. On Facebook the reputation could be the number of 'likes' received, and on Twitter reputation could mean the amount of followers one has.

*Groups:* (The extent to which users form communities) requires organisations to form communities with people with the same interests, and then to target messages and information directly tailored to them. Some social media platforms such as blogs, Google + and Twitter have the functionality to accommodate communities. Organisations need to pay attention to which social media platform they use to achieve this. According to Kietzmann et al., (2011) the more 'social' a network becomes, the bigger the group of friends, followers, and contacts.

This research uses the above as a basis of understanding social media, and how Twitter in particular functions through organisations. There is similar research to Kietzmann et al.'s (2011) that approaches social media in terms of their different functionality and uses. For example, research has been conducted on blogs alone (see Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011; Meraz, 2009; Cooper, 2006), Facebook alone (see Ellison et al., 2007; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Waters et al., 2009) and Twitter alone (see Kwak et al., 2010; Zhao & Rosson, 2009). This study adds to the research on Twitter in the local South African context in developing and understanding its use as an information and communication tool for commercial organisations. Below is a brief discussion of literature that looks closely at how public relations practitioners use social media and social networks.

### **Utility of Social Media in Public Relations**

It is important to note that engaging in conversations is what public relations practitioners have always done. However, there is much to be said about how organisations communicate offline

versus how they communicate online. According to Brown (2009) it has become important for brands to consider whether there is something about the way people gather information online that makes it a better place for them to have conversations in these spaces. The author adds that “what the social web provides is the chance to use ideas to give our consumers something new and different” (pg. 94), and according to the Wright and Hinson’s (2010) annual social media study, this is what brands have done. Their study found that most public relations professionals felt that social media tools were important to their organisations. For example, Nashua is one of Southern Africa’s leading distributors of digital software and solutions for the last 25 years<sup>18</sup>. The organisation joined Facebook in 2012 with 30 fans and nineteen people talking about the brand. In 2013 the brand had grown to 15 254 fans and 503 people talking about it<sup>19</sup>. Brands like Nashua are seeing the benefit of using social media in their business and communication practices, and as more South Africans connect to the Internet there is likely to be more conversations and engagement taking place on social media.

As mentioned earlier, the growth in numbers of South Africans online has primarily been driven by mobile, with most South Africans accessing social media platforms via mobile devices. However, low Internet penetration in South Africa (compared to developed countries), coupled with poor bandwidth, has put the social media landscape on the back foot compared to more developed countries<sup>20</sup>. Regardless, organisations in South Africa have taken to social media in their public relations practices. One of the reasons is the decline of the reach of some mass media (Daniels, Harber, & Krüger, 2013). The traditional approach of wide reach and repetitive messaging is now being replaced by many and much smaller, niche and people-centric tools.

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<sup>18</sup> Nashua, (Facebook about page) [https://www.facebook.com/NashuaLTD/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/NashuaLTD/info?tab=page_info)

<sup>19</sup> Nashua, (2014). The South African Media Landscape Report 2014 <http://www.nashua.co.za/the-south-african-media-landscape-report-2014/>

<sup>20</sup> International Telecommunication Union (ITU). 2010. ‘Internet Users’, [http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/material/excel/2010/IndividualsUsingInternet\\_00-10.xls](http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/material/excel/2010/IndividualsUsingInternet_00-10.xls) (accessed 29 October 2014).

Newspapers in South Africa such as the *Mail & Guardian* and *City Press* reported that in 2012-2013 they had to shift their strategies to 'digital-first' (a focus on more online journalism) as news-readership habits showed a change during 2012 (Daniels, Harber & Krüger, 2013). An increasing number of consumers were receiving their news through a variety of mobile apps. For example, Daniels, Harber and Krüger's (2013) report on the state of the newsroom in South Africa highlighted how the *Mail & Guardian's* decrease in its print edition was due to an increase in Kindle sales, up to about 2 000 in May 2013 (Daniels, Harber & Krüger, 2013). These are significant findings which show the impact on some mass media channels, highlighting the need for the 'traditional' media industry to take its place in the digital landscape. As mentioned earlier, reasons such as these are the reasons more organisations adopt the use of social media in their practice.

Rogers' (2003) diffusion process is another way of looking at the adoption of social media by public relations practitioners as he provides a suitable framework for understanding the simple adoption of social media. Rogers (2003) presents five types of adopters that can be used to understand this widespread integration of social media: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. According to the author, innovators within the public relations practice welcome change and are likely to engage with others. Early adopters adopt technologies once they have been tested and proven valuable. Rogers (2003) states that early adopters know the advantages of using online technologies but still need them to be widely reported on before they begin to use them. They also require these technologies to be easy to use. As social media is relatively easy to use, the early majority promote these technologies by demonstrating the ease of adoption. Once more people have adopted these technologies and their use has become normal, the late majority follows, either willingly or from expectation. Laggards are often in denial over the benefits of these technologies which may be due to a lack of skills

and knowledge. The way in which people adopt social media as a whole gives a slight insight into how businesses have and can adopt Twitter into their practice. This thesis assumes that currently most of the organisations in South Africa are the late majority, they have seen through others, most likely international organisations, the benefits of Twitter to their communication practices, and have begun to follow suit.

Furthermore, with the rise of online communication channels as well as the developing trend of organisations adopting these channels into their practice, it can be argued that public relations strategies have, to some degree, changed. Eyrich et al., (2008) conducted an online survey in the United States about the adoption of social media by public relations practitioners and their opinion about the tools. This study revealed the prevalence of social media in the practice. According to this study, public relations practitioners in the United States have adopted at least six different social media tools into their profession (Eyrich et al., 2008). These results found that social networking sites can deliver better results when comparing them to other public relations activities. From these findings Eyrich et al., (2008) report that public relations practitioners are comfortable using new technologies. Similarly, Solis and Breakenridge (2009) confidently state that social media put the public back in public relations. These studies suggest that public relations practitioners are engaging in the use of social media and that they are helping to achieve two-way communication as recommended by Grunig and Hunt (1984).

### **Risks in the Use of Social Media**

Even though the public relations field has been seemingly quick to adopt the use of social media and social networking within its practice, there are some significant risks associated with social networking. For a discussion about brands' use of Twitter, this is important to note. Any kind of

marketing or public relations communication in an online environment is bound to face challenges and risks of backfiring.

According to Brown (2009) social media has introduced a new dimension to crisis and issues management. Customer complaints about an organisation or brand can reach masses of people in a short space of time. Consumers can add photos or videos about brands to a Facebook post or tweet, which can invite comments from people who have had similar experiences with the same organisation. Recent examples in South Africa include, 'a frog in the Woolworths salad' which saw two different customers complain on Twitter and Facebook about seeing a frog in a salad they bought from retailer, Woolworths. This attracted the attention of news outlets (e.g. City Press Online) that began to publish and report the story including a picture of the salad with the frog. Another example is Cell C, a popular cellular network in South Africa that saw backlash from social media, when an angry client put up a billboard stating that Cell C is a "useless company." Many people seeing this responded on social media with pictures of the billboard and new comments about the brand. Lastly, Durex, a condom brand, caused controversy through one of their Twitter campaigns which attempted to create conversation around their edgy sex jokes. Russell (2011) states that the campaign was run by the company's South African team which sought to raise awareness of its Twitter account using a number of jokes of questionable taste. According to Russell (2011) one of their jokes (shown below), which followed the hashtag #DurexJoke, raised the attention of feminists and feminist supporters claiming the tweet supported sexual abuse.

@DurexSA: Why did God give men penises? So they'd have at least one way to shut a woman up. #DurexJoke (DurexSA, 24 November 2011. 3:30pm via Web)

Rape and sexual abuse is a very serious and ongoing issue in South Africa, where reports of rape are frequently being reported. Furthermore, the content and timing of the jokes were questionable as they were made around the time of *16 days of Activism*, an international awareness campaign that fights violence against women and children that takes place every year from 25 November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women) to 10 December (International Human Rights Day) (Russell, 2011). The Durex SA campaign was considered insensitive and against South African beliefs. As a result, the campaign received a mixed response. Some joined in and submitted their own jokes, but a large number of people criticised Durex for its approach. Due to this response from their followers, the brand removed the offending tweets and issued an apology.

In the U.S., comparable studies are provided by Kim (2012) who gives examples by way of case studies that illustrate the risk of social media use by organisations, resulting in criticism by the public and affecting the organisations' reputation. The author mentions the fast food chain organisation McDonalds, who in January of 2012 launched a Twitter campaign involving the hashtag #McDStories in attempt to gain wider attention to their brand. The campaign asked people to post nostalgic stories on Happy Meals. However, this campaign quickly turned negative, as people used the hashtag to share negative experiences of the brand. The article states that instead of garnering positive feedback towards their brand, the McDonald's campaign turned the negative attention back to itself. Similarly, Walton (2012) reports that Toyota, also in 2012, planned a Twitter campaign that was meant to promote their Camry and instead failed. The organisation created a number of Twitter accounts from @CamryEffect1 to @CamryEffect9 and used these accounts to directly engage with users. Walton (2012) states that Toyota intended to engage users, but had an opposite effect. Due to the many Twitter handles that Toyota created, users accused Toyota of spamming them with unwelcome messages.

## Social Media in South Africa

To explore the use of social media in the public relations practice in a country such as South Africa, this section looks at the impact of social media in the country. As mentioned earlier, if one considers the large number of people using social media in South Africa, the importance of analysing social media in the country as a public relations tool cannot be ignored. According to Kent and Taylor (2010) when looking at the use of social media country by country, African countries are ranked much lower than other countries globally. However, Gossier (2008) states that Africa is not absent from the Internet.

When African countries are ranked with each other, South Africa's use of social media is much higher. According to the Social Media Landscape study in 2014, provided by World Wide Worx and Fuseware (2014), Facebook is the most popular social media tool with 9.4 million active users in South Africa, up from 6.8 million in 2013. Twitter was second with 5.5 million compared to the 2.4 million in 2013. According to the report 78% of people in the country access Facebook from their mobile phones and 85% access Twitter on their mobile phones. Furthermore, the biggest tweeting day of the week is a Monday followed by Friday, while Saturday is the slowest.<sup>21</sup>

The report also highlighted the increased use of social media by South African organisations, revealing that 93% of major brands use Facebook, 79% use Twitter, 58% YouTube, 46% LinkedIn and 28% Pinterest. The content that gets the most engagement in South Africa is *emotional content*; content that triggers emotions from the audience whether happy or sad, *shock content*; content that surprises or seems surreal,<sup>22</sup> *news content*; trending news, *charity work* and

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<sup>21</sup> World Wide Worx and Fuseware (2014) Social Media Landscape Report. [29 Nov 2014]

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

*animals*. The report includes an analysis of South African consumers' use of social networking sites Facebook, Twitter, Mxit and LinkedIn, among others. However, Facebook and Twitter have been mentioned here in detail because the social network being studied is Twitter. And because Facebook has been noted as the most popular it was included as a point of comparison.

Despite the large numbers of social media and social networking that this survey shows, it also highlights that organisations are still figuring out how to measure their social media value. Using Twitter as an example, while 74% use number of followers as a key measure on Twitter, only 24% measure the number of their own customers who are followers. Similarly, while 72% measure effectiveness according to comments and mentions, only 40% consider sentiment analysis. An introduction to Twitter as well as a brief discussion of previous literature is provided in the following section.

## **Twitter**

Throughout this literature review there have been several mentions of Twitter in relation to social media, the business practice and also in relation to the public relations practice. This section will provide a clear definition and overview of Twitter; explain the application and the ways in which it functions. Previous literature on social networks such as Chen (2011), boyd and Ellison (2007), Beer (2008), and Burns (2011) suggest that Twitter is one of the most successful and popular social media platforms in the world. The micro-blogging site is increasingly becoming highly effective as a way of disseminating news.

The Twitter platform was launched in July 2006. Burns (2011) describes it as a network that is designed for brief messaging because it allows users to send out 140 character messages. The messages sent out are called 'tweets' and are visible to others called 'followers' which refers to

the people who subscribe or 'follow' a person's tweets or Twitter page. The subscribing process is also called 'following' or 'follow', and Twitter users are able to 'follow' each other on Twitter. This means that all tweets that a user sends out will be visible to all those who follow them. These tweets will also appear on a 'timeline' which combines the tweets from all the people that a user follows, hence micro-blogging. Murthy (2012) defines microblogging as "an internet-based service in which (1) users have a public profile in which they broadcast short public messages or updates (2) messages become publicly aggregated together across users, and (3) users can decide whose messages they wish to receive, but not necessarily who can receive their messages" (p. 1061). The definition of Twitter in its simplest term is provided by Chen (2011) who describes Twitter as an "Internet social network and micro blogging platform with both mass and interpersonal communication features" (p. 755). Its developers however describe Twitter as a "real time information network powered by people all around the world that lets you share and discover what's happening now". Therefore, the key aspect to Twitter is its ability to provide and disseminate information.

Unlike other social network sites, like Facebook, where users often interact with people they know offline (boyd, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007), users on Twitter interact with people they have found to share interests with, which can sometimes lead to interactions with strangers and celebrities, (even brands). Murthy (2012) explains that this is what sets Twitter apart from other social networks, like Facebook and LinkedIn, where following each other is mutual. Twitter serves four main purposes which Hermida (2010) lists as "daily chatter, conversation, sharing information and reporting news" (p. 299). These uses are relevant to this study as an examination of the ways in which Twitter is used by organisations to communicate. Is it daily chatter? Are they creating conversation? Are they simply sharing information? Essentially, this functionality illustrates its usefulness to organisations and public relations practitioners. Bruns

and Burgess (2011) also note that besides the follower/followee relationship, Twitter features many other tools for communicating.

***Twitter Functionality: Tweets, @s, Retweets, URLs and Hashtags***

Conversations that happen between Twitter users occur through the ‘at sign’: (@). The Twitter glossary describes the ‘at sign’ as a sign used to call out usernames in Tweets<sup>23</sup>. It goes on to describe a username as how individuals are identified on Twitter<sup>24</sup>. That is, a user can send tweets to another user by starting the tweet with an @\_sign before the username of the person they wish to tweet, such as, @BrandPRLondon. Here are some examples of tweets utilising this function:

***Justin Bieber:*** @BrandWatch is totally amazeballs

***Giuliana Rancic:*** Thrilled to be walking in @TheHeartTruth show at @MBFashionWeek. Heart health is soo important. Let’s protect our heart ladies!

***Brett Michaels:*** @SamsungMobileUS ur tweets suck.

A tweet can also be retweeted; this refers to the re-posting of someone else’s tweet. According to the Twitter help centre (2009) the use of RT at the beginning of a tweet is meant to show that the tweet is a re-post from somebody else. It shows that they are quoting someone else’s tweet<sup>25</sup>. Twitters’ retweet feature helps people quickly share information with other followers. On Twitter, the use of sharing content is common (Himmelboim et al., 2013). A normal tweet is seen by all the users’ followers unless it begins with the ‘at sign’ (@). Only then can it be seen by the person it is directed to and others on that user’s follower list that have the same followers in common with them. The function of the retweet feature however, allows tweets to be seen across many timelines. Burns (2012) shows how the retweet function of Twitter exemplifies the nature

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<sup>23</sup> Twitter Support. The Twitter Glossary. Retrieved: <https://support.twitter.com/articles/166337-the-twitter-glossary>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Twitter help centre, (2009). Retrieved: <https://support.twitter.com/articles/77606>

of Twitter as a social networking site. This feature is significant because it is an efficient way to disseminate information, which is vital to the public relations practice. Here is an example of tweets utilising the retweet (RT) function:

*Jon Galloway: RT @bennage: RT @devlicious: New Blog Post Caliburn Hello World  
<http://bit.ly/75bkFM>*

A tweet can also feature links, officially called a Hyperlink. When users click on a link it takes them from one web page to another. Unless people have used a search engine, following a link is one of the most common ways to find new content on the Internet. Twitter allows users to include links known as URLs (uniform resource locator, also known as a web address) in their tweets that point to external sources. Due to the fact that users frequently wish to share web-content, and tweets are restricted to 140 characters, a popular strategy has been to shorten URLs (such as Bit.ly).

The hashtag (#) is another communication function to note. Bruns and Burgess (2011) describe hashtags as “brief keywords or abbreviations prefixed by the # symbol” (p. 4). These hashtags are included in tweets for example #Inaug2012 during the Obama inauguration in 2012 or #Egypt during the country's January 2011 uprising or #kony2012 during the campaign to bring a fugitive Ugandan warlord to justice. Bruns and Burgess (2011) argue that hashtags are used particularly when news breaks and their purpose is to make tweets about a topic more visible. Apart from news events, hashtags are also used to organise other discussions based on user interests, such as, providing a channel for people to organise Twitter-based meet ups. Here are some examples of tweets using the hashtag functionality:

**Miley Cyrus:** *Wow wow wow #royalwedding soooo dramatic. FLAWLESS =] How lucky is Kate? It's every girls dream to be a princess. Harry? Haha Jk Jk*

**Heeren Ghandi:** *Something about #KFC always makes it seem like a good idea...it never is... NEVER*

**SABloggers:** *How often do you check your blog stats? #WeBlogForLoveChat*

Hashtags are easy to find on Twitter using Twitter's search functionality. Users can search all the tweets with the same hashtag in order to keep up with conversations and news stories. According to Bruns and Burgess (2011), joining conversations via a hashtag makes it possible to communicate with others with the same interests. These authors argue that along with the URL links, the hashtag function is what has led to Twitter being recognised as a platform for news, information dissemination and discussion.

These are the other common terms that are used when discussing the functions of Twitter and are very relevant to the current research in determining communication patterns and strategies by organisations. Below is a summary of some of the literature regarding Twitter and its use.

### ***Twitter: A Brief Literature Review***

Since the early days of Twitter which was created in 2006, several researchers such as Huberman, Romero and Wu (2008), and Marwick and boyd (2010), started to focus on the communication practices of the platform. Consequently, the research that followed, for example, Rossi and Magnani (2012), has shown the ways in which Twitter has become an online space where issues can be discussed publicly and where information can be shared. According to Bruns and Stieglitz (2013), Twitter is usually studied in relation to crisis communication (Hughes & Palen, 2009; Mendoza et al., 2010), political communication, (Bruns & Burgees, 2011; Harlow & Harp, 2012), brand communication (Krüger, Stieglitz, & Potthof, 2012; Lin & Peña, 2011), and ordinary interaction between people (boyd et al., 2009; Papacharissi & Gibson,

2011; Marwick & boyd, 2011). This study will contribute to the already existing literature on Twitter and brand communication as it aims to understand how commercial brands in South Africa communicate with their consumers through Twitter.

Bruns and Burgess' (2011) article *New Methodologies for Researching News Discussion on Twitter* states that one of the most common uses of Twitter is reporting events as they happen. For a practice such as public relations that requires practitioners to create awareness and media opportunities for brands (Fathi, 2008) and manage reputations (Lages & Simkin, 2003), Twitter allows them to tweet about and spread information online for people to access any time. Another wide use of Twitter according to Bruns and Burgess (2011) is for ongoing discussions. When it comes to businesses, researchers such as Fathi (2008), Davies et al., (2002) and Moloney (2000) find that organisations are starting to see Twitter and its use not only as a way to create awareness about their products or services, but also to discover opportunities to build and manage the organisations' reputations. Bruns (2005) described this discussion by organisations as gate watching - what he notes as highlighting, sharing, and evaluating relevant material released by others online. The discussions on Twitter are therefore produced by what people are already interested in, because people generally follow others with the same interests.

### ***Twitter and Public Relations***

Even though Twitter is eight years old, it has quickly become popular and important to researchers, as is highlighted above. According to Kwak et al., (2010) and Rogers (2003) public relations practitioners are likely to use a social networking tool in their practice if they see it as important to their jobs. In this regard, Twitter is being adopted by many public relations practitioners (Farhi, 2009).

When studying Twitter, researchers, e.g. Farhi (2009) and Jacques (2009), have attempted to answer the questions: what is drawing people to Twitter? And what are they utilising it for? With such underlying questions, it is worthwhile to list what the uses of Twitter could be in relation to the business field. This literature returns to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four public relations communication models again, in order to unpack the use of Twitter by organisations and public relations practitioners. First Grunig and Hunt (1984) provide the press agency model (also known as the publicity model). According to Grunig and Hunt (1984) communication using the press agency model is meant to draw attention using any means necessary to a particular person, product or topic and convince the public of this idea. This notion relates to the idea of propaganda which was highlighted in the discussion in Chapter 2. However, as mentioned earlier, little research has been done to explore how Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models can be used in an online environment. Waters and Williams (2011) provided a few examples. These authors state that on Twitter, the press agency model might be best represented by the use of exciting, attention-seeking words, similar to what would normally happen traditionally in public relations. The press agency model was often used with flashy words on television and radio announcements (Waters & Williams, 2011).

The next model that Grunig and Hunt (1984) provide is the public information model, which is meant to issue truthful information about a person, product or topic without any promotion or publicity. Grunig and Hunt (1984), state that the essential idea behind the public information model is the duty to provide people with accurate information. The information distributed to the public is one way and organisations using this model do not often research their target audience. According to Waters and Williams (2011), this model represents what the focus of Twitter originally was, which was to ask its users to answer the question, 'What's Happening?' When applying it to Twitter, the public information model can include details that involve the sharing

of information from an organisation. This information can either alert followers to some of their business decisions, or remind followers of some of their future events.

The next model provided by Grunig and Hunt (1984) is the two-way asymmetrical model. In this model, feedback enters the process, making it different from the other two models. According to Waters and Williams (2011) this model is more adaptable to Twitter than any of the other models. These authors suggest the ways in which this model could be adapted on Twitter, for example, sending out updates in the form of surveys or polls asking for their followers' feedback on a particular topic so that they can learn about their publics (Waters & Williams, 2012).

It is the fourth communications model that many researchers such as Seltzer and Mitrook (2007), Grunig and Hunt (1984), and Waters and Williams (2011), among others, suggest organisations should integrate into their communication practices. Grunig and Hunt (1984), state that the two-way symmetrical model encourages mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. This model encourages an open communication process that involves feedback. Waters and Williams (2011) suggest that on Twitter this model would be represented by conversations between an organisation and its followers, the organisation's efforts in resolving conflict, and the organisation's ability to notice and recognise their followers, which is done by using @ replies. As these roles of Twitter in shaping the public relations practice in South Africa have not been thoroughly researched, the use of Twitter will be approached in this context, to begin to fill the gaps.

## **Conclusion**

The above sections explored surrounding literature and research findings in the social media field. Within these sections a definition of social media and social networking was offered, and

the traditional roles of media and the rise of social media was highlighted, which aimed at understanding the differences and similarities in public relations in an online and offline environment. An examination of social networking was given, particularly with regards to social networking and social media's role in the business environment, both internationally and in the South African context. Furthermore, the *Honeycomb Framework* of social media was provided in order to illustrate the ways in which social media is used by organisations and public relations practitioners. This led to the discussion surrounding public relations practitioners' use of social media and social networking. Social media in South Africa was also discussed more broadly, paying particular attention to the figures and statistics used to determine the popularity of social media in South Africa, its use as well as the selection of Twitter in regards to the study. A definition and overview of Twitter was also provided within this literature review, with a discussion of its functionalities and uses within the business environment with particular emphasis on the public relations practice.

The next chapter will highlight the chosen methodology for this research, the research design and strategy, along with an outline of dominant research methods for studying social media.

## CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

As mentioned in the problem statement, South Africa is a developing market that is experiencing many changes, especially in communication with regards to brands and their consumers. Due to the emergence of new media technologies, communication patterns have evolved compared to traditional print and broadcast media. Brands have had to adapt to new ways of communicating, particularly in South Africa where, Twitter for example, is a relatively new information and communication tool, particularly in the organisational context. Achieving marketing and/or public relations success results in adapting to new media technologies, because what worked in the past will not work today, because as the market changes, the business approach must also adjust accordingly. It is therefore important to understand and identify how commercial brands in South Africa communicate with their consumers through Twitter (research aim) and characterise the content of organisations tweets using the already existing communication models provided by Grunig and Hunt (1984) based on international public relations practices (research objective).

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How do commercial brands in South Africa use Twitter as a communication tool?
2. How do these brands' tweets reflect Grunig and Hunt's four models of public relations?
3. How can these commercial brands build relationships with their publics using Twitter?

As this study explores the use of Twitter, it is important to note that several Twitter studies have shown that studying tweets can provide valuable information about individuals and/or groups (Paul & Dredze, 2011; Barbosa & Feng, 2010, Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, & Welp, 2010; O'Connor, Balasubramanian, Routledge, & Smith, 2010). In this chapter, the research design and strategy used in the study are identified. First an outline of dominant research methods for studying social media is discussed with an explanation of the choice to adopt a qualitative content analysis research approach. As this study relies heavily on Twitter, the next section discusses the methods that are traditionally used for researching Twitter. The chapter then outlines the rationale for the research design, with a detailed analysis of the units of analysis and categories chosen for the research as well as the data collection and analysis methods. The chapter then concludes by highlighting the ethical considerations for researching Twitter and advantages and disadvantages of the chosen research method.

### **Dominant Research Methods for Studying Social Media**

There has been a rise in the number of online research studies since the development of the Internet (Mann & Stewart, 2000). As this study relies profoundly on understanding social media, and exploring organisations' use of it to build and manage relationships, most of the discussion will refer to online research methods. According to Jones (1999) most of the research methods in online environments are traditional qualitative and quantitative methodologies that have been adapted to fit new media. For a study such as the present one, both qualitative and quantitative methods could be used. Even though research methods can sometimes overlap, each method used plays its own role in addressing the research question.

The discussion about whether qualitative or quantitative methods are more effective in researching certain topics has been a long-standing debate in research literature. For example,

when studying social media, the dominant research methods have been quantitative methods, such as surveys provided in Correa, et al., (2010), Chou et al., (2009), Johnson and Kaye, (2004), Saldanha and Krishnany (2010), quantitative content analyses provided in Lifvergren, (2010) and Jones et al., (2008) or a network analysis illustrated in Borgatti, Everett and Freeman (2006) and Knoke and Yang (2008). It is clear that at most times the analysis used for social media research is quantitative. These results are also similar in the public relations context. For example, a content analysis by Daymon and Holloway (2011) of articles in five international public relations journals suggests that qualitative studies in public relations research are a few. Public relations theory is dominated by quantitative research such as Grunig's (1992) Excellence Study or Dozier and Lauzen's (2000) study. There are, however, several studies that have used qualitative research methods to study social media, such as Ellison et al., (2007) who studied the benefits of college students having many Facebook friends, and Subrahmanyam et al.'s (2008) study on the use of social networks by adults. However, this limitation in the use of qualitative research methods provides opportunities for more of this kind of research, because the content created by people on social media offers a wide range of opportunities for researchers to engage in qualitative research.

This research included a qualitative analysis because these methods are usually preferable in research that seeks to understand a certain practice or phenomenon. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define qualitative research as "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (p. 17). With qualitative research the researcher is able to delve into the meaning which is concerned with the communication, and in this case, communication by organisations. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggest that certain questions motivate qualitative analysis. These questions include how are people communicating, what are they communicating with and what does this mean? These

questions essentially mirror the original questions of this study. This research seeks to find out *how* brands are communicating on Twitter. The research pays specific attention to the communication style of brands in South Africa according to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations communication and what it means. It involves an analysis of Twitter's use as an organisational communication tool in a South African context.

A qualitative research approach is the dominant method in gaining an in-depth understanding. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2002), "properly understood qualitative enquiry becomes a civic, participatory, collaborative project that joins the researcher with the researched in an on-going moral dialogue" (p. ix). Romand et al., (2003) argue that such dialogues can offer a researcher deeper understandings of people's feelings, views and attitudes. Lastly, according to Scott (1991), social sciences have witnessed how social media and social networking have become more focused on relationships. The author argues that today social sciences study social media as more than tools to form relationships but as tools that nurture these relationships at a deeper level. However, the analysis of the use of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models (provided in Chapter 6) will draw on quantitative approaches in that these findings were quantified (discussed further in the research design).

There are a range of established qualitative research methods that can be used to study social media and public relations. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), qualitative methods include focus groups, interviews, case studies, ethnography, critical analysis and qualitative content analysis. This study implemented a qualitative content analysis to investigate how organisations use Twitter. When researching social media within the business practice, most studies have a tendency to use both a quantitative and qualitative content analysis research method (Carpentier & Ducharme, 2005). Despite the potential for qualitative content analysis,

few studies have used this method and any other qualitative method to examine social media. There are only a few studies which have used qualitative content analysis, for example, Groschl (2011); Hall and Irvine (2009); Parker et al., (2010), all of whom examined websites more generally. Therefore, a qualitative content analysis was chosen for this research because it follows Parker et al.'s (2011) suggestion that qualitative analysis gives researchers "the flexibility to identify new, emerging research questions and units of analyses which may not be apparent until "immersed" in the discourse" (p. 2). Despite this study's choice of a qualitative content analysis, it should be noted that there is a variety of ways of researching social media. Below are some of the methods that have been used to research Twitter specifically.

### **Methods for Researching Twitter**

According to Bruns and Highfield (2012), and Bruns (2012) there is a limited amount of existing research on Twitter. However, recently there has been a growing body of work that studies Twitter in a number of ways. The most common research on Twitter has been the research into its descriptions and functionalities (e.g. Barnes & Bohringer, 2011; Huberman, Romero, & Wu, 2008; Erickson, 2008; Krishnamurthy, Gill, & Arlitt, 2008; Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). Honeycutt and Herring (2009) and boyd, Golder, and Lotan, (2010) examine the process of communicating on Twitter using @replies and retweets. This approach differs from Mendoza, et al., (2010) who, in their examination of Twitter patterns, used the hashtag (#) for study. As mentioned in the previous chapter, using the hashtag function allows researchers to retrieve a great range of information. Other studies have focused on Twitter as a learning tool (Galagan, 2009; Grosseck & Holotescu, 2008; Tan, Shen, & Shen, 2008; Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011; Kassens-Noor, 2012). These and similar studies provide a framework for understanding how Twitter is studied by researchers. Java et al., (2007) focused on the analysis of the Twitter

network structure which other researchers including Rossi and Magnani (2012), and Bruns (2011) have also done, particularly with studying hashtags and keywords.

There are two methods commonly used when studying online networks, Postill and Pink (2012) list them as, web content analysis (see Honeycutt and Herring, 2009; Gill et al., 2008; Agichtein et al., 2008; Loia et al., 2007; Kwak et al., 2010) and social network analysis (see Sabater & Sierra, 2002; Java et al., 2007; Cross et al., 2002; Christakis & Fowler, 2009; Prieur et al., 2009). The idea of analysing social networks has become popular through books such as *Connected* (Christakis & Fowler, 2009) and *Linked* (Barabási, 2003) that illustrate the recent developments in network analysis. Other authors such as Haythornthwaite (2002) have also used social network analysis to study online environments. Due to increasing social media and social networking studies, and following the use of the web content analysis and social network analysis, a number of other tools have been developed in order to explore networked data. Hansen (2011) states that these tools allow users to “characterise entire networks” and “allow[s] users to visualise networks...identify patterns that are hard to see...” (p. 44). As mentioned, there are a number of network analysis tools that researchers have used to study social media including Guess (Adar, 2006); JUNG (O’Madadhain et al., 2005) and Prefuse (Heer et al., 2005) however, recently, tools such as NodeXL are becoming popular in studying social media, and in this case, Twitter (Yep & Shulman, 2014; Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith, 2010; Koepfler & Hansen, 2012; Himmelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013). NodeXL is a program that intends to make network analysis tasks easier to perform by importing data directly from Twitter or any social media application, and quantifying the data using Microsoft Excel. For example, Hansen (2011) shows that NodeXL has been used in previous studies to map the followers of employers’ Twitter accounts. This study did not utilise any of these tools as it was more concerned with the content of the tweets, rather than how users are networked.

Furthermore, while previous studies on Twitter usually choose quantitative methods, as showcased above, some studies used qualitative methods such as online ethnography to study social media (see Rotman et al., 2012 and Kozinets et al., 2010). Howard (2002) describes ethnography as first hand observations of human behaviour. According to Bowler (2010) and Hine (2000), online ethnography has been adapted from traditional ethnography to explore human behaviour online and what the implications of the Internet on human behaviour are. Studies such as those by Leander and McKim (2003), and Johnson and Humphry (2012) have utilised online ethnography in their online research to understand the way teenagers use the Internet in their everyday lives. Not only have studies been done on the Internet as a whole, Matic (2011) provides an online ethnographic study using Facebook, Twitter and Instant Messaging services to determine whether the different technologies people use construct their identity.

### **Theorising New Media Research**

The Internet has provided scholars with opportunity for research (Walker, 2006). New media, particularly, social networking, blogging and micro-blogging, through their availability on mobile phones, smart phones and tablets, “generates new forms of data which are of significance for social research as well as new methods and techniques for analysing this kind of data” (Edwards et al., 2013, p. 245). Previous studies such as Cho and Khang (2006), Tomasello (2001), Kim and Weaver (2002) and Rice (2005) have analysed research on the Internet and related digital technologies. These and similar studies have shown an increase in the available research on the Internet and online communication over time. Stieglitz et al., (2013) state that this interest comes from what Manovich (2011), and Burgess and Bruns (2012) call ‘Big Social Data’ which is driven by the large-scale information that is available online from popular social

networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. This illustrates its significance to this study, as researchers are beginning to understand the reach and the potential new media has in the communication field.

Lievrouw, (2002) provides four approaches to new media research; the first of which she calls the *historical/institutional* approach which focuses on the development of these technologies, including their key features. The second approach she terms the *social-psychological* approach, which follows the impacts that these technologies have on its users (individuals, groups or societies). The third approach is *micro-sociological* which focuses on interpersonal communication carried out via these technologies. This approach is important to note for this study because according to the author, organisational communication continues to be a major arena for this type of research. This approach is also considered the most widely used approach in most new media research as other researchers using this approach have examined the way new media technologies have allowed users to express their identities, interests and relationships. The fourth approach is *macro-sociological*, which emphasises “whole community or whole society phenomena” (p.3). This approach includes the diffusion of these new technologies, its content and its practices. This approach is also closely related to the research focus of this study as it aims to understand the communication process of South African brands with their publics through Twitter.

### **Challenges of new media research**

Despite the emerging need for research into new media, and the need to analyse and gather relevant information from its content, there have been some challenges. Research into new media can be considered difficult due to the large number of different social media platforms, including the fact that information on these platforms is vast and dynamic (Lee et al., 2012).

Additionally, Lee et al., (2012) state that defining the object of one's study is one of the most basic challenges of new media research. One of the reasons for this is provided by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) when they stated that the new media environment has transformed the audience from simple audiences to diffused audiences. Jones (1999) also addresses the challenges of Internet research. He lists difficulties in describing the status of research and audience research as some of them. For example, audience research becomes more difficult because the use of new media is often private making the audience researcher's presence even more noticeable.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative content analysis proved most suitable to explore and issue deeper understanding of social networking and social media use by commercial brands in South Africa in building relationships with their publics. Although content analysis has traditionally been a quantitative methodology, today content analysis is also a widely used qualitative research method. It is qualitative in that it pays attention to understanding the responses from certain messages in certain media, therefore it is also a method widely used in communication studies (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 18). Schilling (2006) defines the qualitative content analysis as a "systematic, rule-based process of analysing verbal and textual data" (p. 28), for example, interviews, documents, focus groups etc. Cole (1988) supports this definition; however Cole's (1988) definition includes visual communication messages. Similarly, Wimmer and Dominick (2006) state that content analysis is a process examining the content of recorded information.

Within this study, most of the understanding is aimed to be achieved by focusing on the content of organisations' tweets. In this regard, this study required a method such as qualitative content analysis to examine the content of tweets because according to Kaid (1989), Patton (2002), and

Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) qualitative content analysis allows researchers to explore the meanings behind physical messages. Furthermore, a qualitative content analysis finds significance in the use of language, and analysing the use of language is important in communication studies as discovered by Pleijter (2006). Tonkiss (1988) also says that the use of different words helps to create and reproduce systems of social meaning. A purely quantitative method alone would limit the ways in which the researcher understands social meaning or the background of the study, (i.e. the South African context).

The specific objective of the content analysis in this study was to characterise the content of organisations tweets using the already existing communication models provided by Grunig and Hunt (1984) based on international public relations practices. The quantitative aspect of the content analysis measured the frequencies (numbers and percentages) of the content of the organisations' tweets as defined by the categories (presented below). The qualitative aspect of the content analysis helped to make meaning from the content provided in the tweets.

## **Sample**

Twitter has been chosen in this study as a sample of social media, and/or online communication channels. There are numerous social media channels and information networks that could have been used in such a study, however as mentioned in Chapter 1, Twitter is very different from other social media channels like Facebook because people typically log in to the network to share and receive news content (Kwak et al., 2010).

In order to highlight how commercial brands in South Africa use Twitter as a communication tool, a purposive sample of twelve brands currently using Twitter were chosen. Essentially, the present study addresses the purposive sample's institutional use of Twitter and their publishing

practices through the lens of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models of public relations communication. These brands were identified in Twitaholic.com's Top 100 list of Twitterholics based on Followers in South Africa in 2013<sup>26</sup> and Memeburn's people to follow list (Memeburn, 2013) to ensure a good sample. The sample drew from organisations that social media experts listed as successfully using Twitter for public relations. This study found that two websites (Memeburn and Twitaholic) are the most used websites in determining social media issues around the world, particularly Memeburn. According to their 'about' page, the website states that it "focuses on everything digital in the emerging markets sphere, from current events in the world of social media, mobile and general technology" (Memeburn, 2013). Furthermore, Twitaholic provides up to date statistics of followers in different countries. This is why these websites were chosen for the selection of the sample. Furthermore, the research made sure that the brands spread out across major industries, apart from simply featuring on these lists (explained in detail further below).

While the organisations selected represent only a small proportion of South African organisations online, this purposive sample offers insights into a selection of organisations and how they use Twitter for their public relations practices. The aim with this qualitative content analysis is not to generalise the findings, but to provide a broad overview and some insights into the uses of Twitter for public relations in South Africa. Having said this, the study attempted to draw the sample from a wide range of different types of organisations.

All the content tweeted by the twelve South African brands over a two month period, (August - September 2013) was used for analysis. In total 2,000 tweets were collected. A content analysis was then employed to categorise and analyse these tweets. Tweets over the two month period

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<sup>26</sup> <http://twitaholic.com/top100/followers/bylocation/South+Africa/>

selected were found to be very similar to tweets over other periods in the year. The selection of two months' worth of tweets was believed to be a representative sample of the tweets of each of the twelve brands studied. In addition, there are many commercial South African businesses that use Twitter. Studying all of them would not necessarily yield any additional data as they all tend to communicate along similar patterns. A list of the organisations and brands in the sample is provided in table 1.

**Table 1: List of organisations in sample**

<b>Company</b>	<b>Twitter ID</b>	<b>Type of Company</b>
<b>Vodacom</b>	@Vodacom	Mobile Network
<b>Cell C</b>	@CellC	Mobile Network
<b>Pick N Pay</b>	@PicknPay	Food/grocery
<b>Woolworths</b>	@Woolworths_SA	Food/grocery
<b>Kalahari.com</b>	@kalaharicom	Online Shop
<b>Mediclinic</b>	@Mediclinic	Health
<b>Durex</b>	@DurexSA	Health
<b>FNB</b>	@RBJacobs	Bank
<b>ABSA</b>	@ABSA	Bank
<b>Carling Black Label</b>	@BlacklabelSA	Alcoholic Beverage
<b>Brutal Fruit</b>	@brutalfruitsa	Alcoholic beverage
<b>Cosmopolitan SA</b>	@CosmopolitanSA	Magazine

Since Twitter was founded in 2006, more recent cases were analysed to allow the research results to be current and valuable in existing social media studies in South Africa.

As mentioned above, the brands in the sample represent different service industries in the country; while each of these brands represented the top organisations in these sectors, the research aimed to select brands that provided similar products or services in order to make them more comparable. For each industry sector, the research analysed one major brand and one competitive brand. For example Vodacom (@Vodacom) and Cell C (@CellC), both are mobile networks, and competitors of each other. Vodacom owns more than half of the market share in the mobile network sector, over 52% in 2013 (Giyose, 2013). Cell C (@CellC) who had recently rebranded their organisation owned only 14% (Giyose, 2013). The dynamic between the two organisations is interesting to note. Other organisations, Woolworths (@WOOLWORTHS\_SA) and Pick n Pay (@picknpay), for example are grocery stores that are also the top brands in their sector. Furthermore, ABSA (@ABSA) and FNB (@RBJacobs) are in the banking industry, along with Nedbank, which was not included in the sample but make up the three popular banks in the country. Carling Black Label (@BlacklabelSA) and Brutal Fruit (@brutalfruitsa) are in the alcoholic beverage sector, and while this sector is crowded, these chosen brands are not only popular but are frequent users of Twitter. Durex (@DurexSA) and Mediclinic (@mediclinic) are both in health and safety. The only organisations that stand alone are Kalahari.com (@kalaharicom) and Cosmopolitan SA magazine (@CosmopolitanSA), these two organisations represent different service industries as one belongs to the media and publishing industry and the other to the online shopping sector. However each of the organisations in the sample highlights the different ways in which different organisations communicate.

### ***Categories and Coding Procedures***

The present study employed deductive methods to form the categories and coding procedures of this research. Drawing on the research questions, the development of categories in this study followed Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of communication (press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical, two-way symmetrical). These categories are sensible given the research questions with the aim to measure the extent to which organisation's use of Twitter reflects Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations communication. Krippendorff (1980) states that the way a researcher approaches category formation is significant to the interest of the research. The author further states that categories should be formed as close as possible to the research objective. Therefore these categories seemed effective. Similar to a research paper by Haley Edman (2010) who also studied the use of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models in measuring organisational-public relationships in America, a coding scheme was created to reflect 1) the tweet's content, 2) how it was expressed, and 3) the type of functionality used. This coding scheme was chosen prior to analysing the data as they are based on the research goals. The coding categories are as follows:

***pa*** - press agency; when tweets revealed promotional content or tried to influence their followers to do something that would benefit the organisation, this included promotional offers, such as 'save 20%' etc...

***pi*** - public information; when tweets appeared to be informative without the use of biased or persuasive language. These tweets would often contain information about the brand's activities or other information the brands would feel is relevant to their publics. In line with previous research (e.g., Saxton, Guo, & Brown, 2007; Waters R. D., 2007), public information involves one-way interaction, that is, the exchange of information from the organisation to the public. Therefore, if the post included an @reply it did not fit under public information because @replies demonstrate two-way communication.

**ta** - two-way asymmetrical; where a tweet communicated with publics that intended to get feedback from the public but still implore them to buy the organisations product or service. Most of these posts include @replies. However some also included the use of question marks, as organisations would often do this when asking their followers for feedback.

**ts** - two-way symmetrical; where tweets demonstrated communication efforts to build long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with the public, this includes managing conflicts.

Table 2 summarises the coding categories and includes appropriate examples.

**Table 2: Categories**

Category	Example
<p><b>press agentry (pa):</b> attempting to persuade followers</p>	<p><i>'Save 20% OR 'the best product ever.'</i></p>
<p><b>Public information (pi):</b> informative without being persuasive</p>	<p><i>'Load your airtime with these steps...'</i></p>
<p><b>Two-way asymmetrical (ta):</b> communication with publics with obvious intention to persuade</p>	<p><i>'Want to Get Lindsay Lohans Look, try our new Mascara and tell us what you think'</i></p>
<p><b>Two-way symmetrical (ts):</b> communication efforts in building long term mutually beneficial relationships with the public</p>	<p><i>Happy birthday to @CathyJ, wishing you lots of happiness today, spoil yourself with our free R500 spa gift voucher for you and your friend and send us your pics!</i></p>

## Data Collection

Twitter's high powered data storage enables comprehensive tracking of user participation on social media. One of the main ways in researching user participation and tweets has been to search public data through Twitter's search function, for example by the use of key words and hashtags, however in this case, because all the tweets in the sample were important for analysis, each of the brands' Twitter pages were located on the Twitter platform and followed from the researcher's own personal Twitter account. The network structure of Twitter allows accounts to be either private or public, and would have presented a challenge if any of the brand's accounts were private because information retrieval would have been difficult. However, this was not a challenge during the study as all of the sampled organisations' Twitter pages were public, accessible and easy to follow.

Following these organisations instead of keeping track of them via search tools was in order to keep track of the dialogue and conversations from brands on a daily basis. Most of the data collection was done between 9am and 6pm from Monday to Friday during the two month sample period (August - September 2013). This is because organisations would mostly tweet during these times (working hours) of the day. It was not impossible that organisations would tweet after hours, particularly if there was an event, however it was rare. In the sample, there were some organisations that would tweet less than others, therefore some organisations had more tweets analysed than others. In total, 2,000 tweets were collected, with *at least* 165 tweets analysed from each organisation. Some of the tweets that represented these categories are included in this research as screenshots, as concrete examples.

Furthermore, this research made use of a social media analytics tool *Social Mention* in order to track and measure what is being talked about in terms of the brand/organisation and who is

talking about it. The Social Mention tool analyses tweet sentiment, it highlights if mentions are positive, negative, or neutral. This is not entirely scientific data, but it provided this research with an overall view about how at these brands and organisations fared on social media (as it included results found on Facebook) but most importantly Twitter.

### **Data analysis**

The analysed tweets were placed in one of four categories (press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical) in order to provide insights into their content and how they reflect Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models of public relations. For each category the use of the model was calculated (in %), the objective was to determine if these models are being used, and which model is used the most in South Africa, based on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) observations of the model in the United States.

In summary, the assessment included:

- The content of the tweet, including hashtags, retweets and mentions and in some cases links to articles, photos, or videos (if any were present)
- How it was expressed which in this case, highlights the four models of communication represented in each tweet

### **Ethical Considerations**

Research in online communication has several ethical challenges, particularly in qualitative analyses. One major challenge is in the content published on the Internet, which raises concerns about the consent and privacy of research subjects (Eysenbach & Till 2001; Hookway 2008).

Consent is important, particularly when researching people, and/or organisations. However, in online communication research is distinguished by online private spaces and online public

spaces. Researchers, such as Williams (2012), argue that the distinction between public and private space is not always clear on the Internet. Just because a web page is public does not automatically mean that the individuals who have created it and/or use it see the content shared on it as being public in terms of being available for use in research. However, in striving for an ethically thorough approach to organisations' content, this research concentrated on Twitter accounts firmly located in the public domain with free access. It considered these accounts as free access, as not only were the accounts public, but all of these organisations behind the accounts led people to their social media pages (Twitter included) via their official websites. Therefore, it was concluded that the content used for analysis has been made public by the organisation.

Furthermore, Twitter offers real-time access to large quantities of content through its Application Programming Interface (API). The information that can be gathered through the API includes information about the authors, location, time zone, the time they sent a tweet, the number of followers they have and the number of tweets they have ever sent (Rivers & Lewis, 2014). This is how this study was able to differentiate between private and public profiles. All private content does not appear on Twitters API, or public timelines, and the researcher would have needed to request permission to access it. This research has only collected tweets that appear on Twitter's public timeline search. Thus, all content that has been used in this research falls within the public domain and can be quoted without infringing on ethical principles.

### **Advantages of qualitative content analysis**

Many studies, for example Babbie (2010), Coffey & Atkinson (1996); Downe-Wimboldt (1992); and Hsieh & Shannon, (2005) studied the advantages of qualitative content analysis. Forman and Damschroder (2008) suggested that the biggest advantage to using qualitative content analysis is

that “it is a more hands on approach to research than quantitative content analysis” (p.60). Mayring (2000) along with McNamara (2006) and Marshall and Rossman (2011) provide the following as advantages of qualitative content analysis.

- Allows researchers to have access to the social realities of people via their interpretations of verbal or non-verbal material;
- Allows researchers to explore and understand the meanings behind the things that happen;
- Allows researchers to describe the meanings of these things through content and textual data;
- Provides researchers with categories that help them structure and analyse content;
- It is a discreet method of analysing interactions;
- Allows researchers to process larger data samples.

### **Limitations of Qualitative Content Analysis**

The systematic step by step method is provided as a disadvantage to the research method. Ehnert (2011), states that this is because it might not fit every research problem. Another disadvantage of using a content analysis relates to research questions that are vague or too broad. This means that researchers will have to provide excessive interpretation to the research, and this poses a threat to successful content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In order to have a successful content analysis Zhang and Wildenmuth (2009) maintained that the researchers must identify the important themes or categories within the research and provide an in-depth analysis of the social reality created by these themes and categories.

## **Conclusion**

The chosen methodology for the study was most suited to these research questions. The research focused more on the content of the tweets and its meaning rather than broad patterns. Furthermore, a purely quantitative approach would be less suited to responding to the identified research questions which seek to understand, more specifically, *how*, organisations' use Twitter as a communication tool and how their tweets reflect Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models of public relations communication. In this and the previous chapter the methodology and literature review were discussed, respectively. The following chapters outline the research findings of the study and will follow the objectives of the study as set out in Chapter 1. The following chapters make up the findings of this study, each chapter will focus on answering a research question, that is, chapters 5, 6 and 7 will look at Twitter as a communication tool, organisations' use of Twitter to communicate with their publics, the four models of public relations and how organisations can build relationships with publics via Twitter respectively. Both findings and discussion will be presented in each chapter. The first (Chapter 5) will answer research question number 1, how do commercial brands in South Africa use Twitter as a communication tool? The findings and discussion is presented below.

**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**  
**TWITTER AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL**

**Introduction**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a qualitative content analysis was used to gather the data required to reveal the findings of the study. In this and the following chapters the findings are reported in order to present and discuss the data, as well as compare this data with previous research. This section begins with how organisations are using Twitter as a communication and public relations tool. It presents general data from the organisations' tweets in order to answer the first research question: how are commercial brands using Twitter as a communication tool?

**Frequency of Tweets**

When looking at the number of times the organisations in the sample tweeted, it was noted that on average, the twelve brands and organisations in the sample each used Twitter to communicate an average of twelve times a day. The number of tweets by each organisation is, of course, dependent on how long they have been using Twitter as well as the frequency of their posts. Some brands had been on Twitter longer than others, e.g. FNB (@RBjacobs), however most brands in the sample joined Twitter in the year 2010. With twelve tweets a day, the average tweets per week reached 84, and the average tweets a month reached 336. Within a two month period an organisation was likely to have tweeted 672 times, on average. These results show significant change in how South African organisations viewed and used Twitter as in 2010 only a few organisations were registered on Twitter and the average tweets per user was 246 tweets per month (Fuseware, 2010).

The number of times an organisation tweets per day has been used in this study to symbolise the relationship building and connection opportunities an organisation has with the public. The number of times an organisation tweeted was critical because it determined communication patterns by the organisation. For example, out of all the brands in the sample, Pick N Pay (@PicknPay) tweeted the most times, reaching an average of 20 tweets on certain days. The alcoholic beverage Brutal Fruit (@brutalfruitsa) and health company Durex (@DurexSA) had the lowest number of tweets a day, averaging zero tweets on certain days. Simply because Durex SA (@DurexSA) and Brutal Fruit (@brutalfruitsa) did not tweet on certain days their communication with their publics, via Twitter, was limited. It can be assumed that certain brands see social media and social networking as complimentary to their marketing and public relations activities and not as their primary relations or communication tool (Chapter 6 highlights this notion).

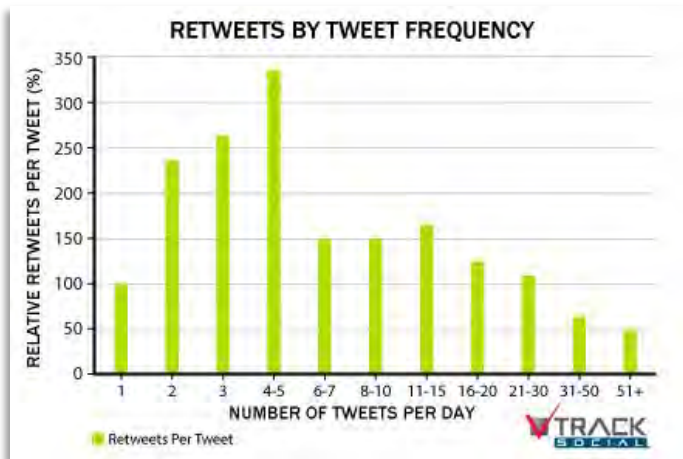
Tweeting was noted to have more of a benefit for organisations. When analysing Durex SA (@DurexSA) and Brutal Fruit (@brutalfruitsa) results emerged that showed that their low tweet frequency may be ineffective. Evans (2010) argues that the aim of an organisation (both offline and online) is to increase their visibility by reaching the widest possible audience. The author suggests that because Twitter is constantly being used to share information, it is necessary for organisations to be present on the platform. Furthermore, unless an organisation tweets enough to get noticed they may be unsuccessful in their communication efforts. A study by TrackSocial<sup>27</sup> shows similar results. The study, which focused particularly on retweets (RTs) as a form of interaction, highlighted the advantage to organisations tweeting between 4 to 5 times per day. When they tweet four to five times per day, brands see over 300% more retweets per tweet than when they tweet just once. The TrackSocial study also noted that the percentage of

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<sup>27</sup> TrackSocial, (2012). Retrieved: <http://tracksocial.com/blog/2012/10/optimizing-twitter-engagement-part-2-how-frequently-to-tweet/>

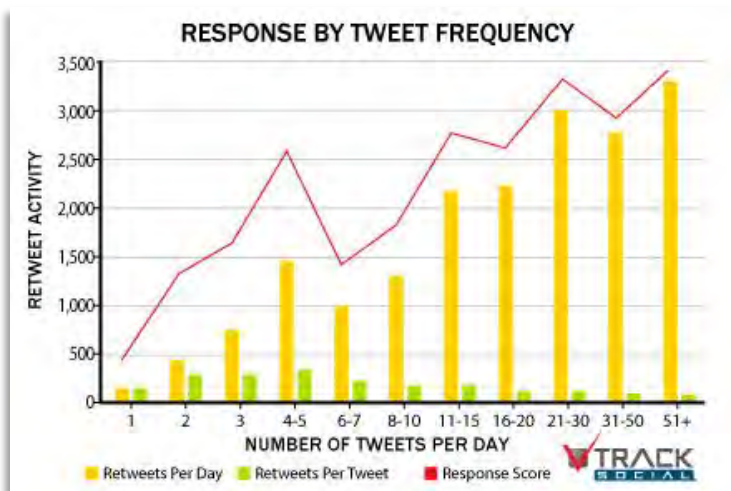
retweets per tweet drops when brands tweet more than five times per day despite the fact that the total number of retweets the brand is seeing still increases.<sup>28</sup> The two graphs below by the TrackSocial study illustrate this fact. The first graph illustrates the percentage of retweets a brand had per tweet

**Figure 2**



(Via TrackSocial; Bar graph image via Shutterstock)

**Figure 3**



(Via TrackSocial; Bar graph image via Shutterstock)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

The second graph illustrates the percentage of retweets a brand had per tweet and per day and what the response from the public was.

One of the social media monitoring and analytics tools this study used to gather such data was *Social Mention*, a tool that allows users to track and measure what is being talked about, who is talking about it and any other topic related to a specific industry. When entered into the Social Mention database, Durex (@DurexSA) produced an 18% strength record which refers to the likelihood that the brand was being discussed on social media and a 5:1 sentiment which refers to the ratio of mentions that are generally positive to those that are generally negative, compared to Pick n Pay (@PicknPay) (the organisation that tweeted the most) which had a 48% strength record and an 8:1 sentiment. Therefore, it was discovered that the number of times an organisation tweets (or shares on social media) and the response they get per tweet (post) or per day (whether in the form of retweets, mentions, followers) plays an important role in the ways in which organisations use Twitter, because it impacts engagement levels, the perception of the organisation and the visibility of tweets. This observation suggests that organisations in South Africa who are active users of Twitter are becoming aware of what their presence or absence on the network might entail for them, as six of the twelve (50%) of the organisations in the sample were present on Twitter most of the day, every day.

As the number of people on Twitter has grown over the years, it was discovered that Twitter has become one of the 'go-to' social networks in terms of communicating with the public. The brands used in the study spent more time on Twitter in a day than some would on other social media platforms. This was discovered through a quick sweep of each of the brands Facebook pages, even though Facebook wasn't being analysed. Organisations arguably spend more time on Twitter because Twitter is based on real-time communication and information sharing.

Organisations are given the opportunity to market and advertise their brands every day, but also keep up with what their followers are saying to them, as they are saying it to them in real-time. Furthermore, it was discovered that the type of content shared on Twitter often allows brands to spend more time talking to their consumers.

### **Using Twitter for various types of communication**

Vodacom (@vodacom) and Cell C (@CellC) are two competitors in the communication providers industry in South Africa. In such a competitive market, organisations have to make a strong commitment to communicating with their consumers. This can also be said about the other brands in the sample, as most of them are competitors of each other as well, as described in Chapter 4. However, in using Vodacom and Cell C as an example, Vodacom (@vodacom) stated “making every customer smile” as part of its business strategy (Genesys, 2012). In doing so, they created a social media strategy with the aim of providing their consumers with relevant, engaging information that allows consumers to interact with the brand and also that allows the brand to answer any customer enquiries (Genesys, 2012). It is because of this social media strategy that Vodacom (@vodacom) has one of the largest social media followings in South Africa, with 86, 054 followers on Twitter, higher than many of the other organisations in the sample apart from Woolworths (@WOOLWORTHS\_SA). This is discussed further in the sections below. However, Vodacom’s (@vodacom) social media strategy leads to what Bregman and Haythornthwaite (2001) refer to as “opportunities for presentation” (p.5). Vodacom (@Vodacom) presented themselves openly on Twitter. The organisation found that their followers required quick responses to their tweets. Below are a few examples that show the time between the responses Vodacom (@Vodacom) gives their followers on Twitter.

**Figure 4**



Screenshot, Vodacom tweet (27.09.13)

In the above example, Vodacom (@vodacom) took sixteen minutes to respond to their follower's tweet. Such a quick response time proves beneficial to the way Vodacom (@Vodacom) uses Twitter as a communication tool. According to World Wide Worx and Fuseware's (2013) figures, the average brand takes an average of 4.5 hours to reply to a tweet (World Wide Worx & Fuseware, 2013). Vodacom, in this case is seen to place a high value in immediate communication in their public relations efforts. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the @\_sign is one of the most significant functionalities on Twitter. This is because it is the basis for how most conversations between two people begin. Twitter almost represents 'face-to-face communication' and instant messaging', therefore, when users use the @\_sign in their tweet, at most times they expect an immediate response as if they were talking to someone directly. The same is applied to brands and organisations. Users expect the brands and organisations they tweet to respond to them.

Meaningful interaction on social media by brands is likely to garner support of the brand by their followers and friends, that they recommend the brand. According to Merrill et al., (2011), when people develop a ‘like’ and ‘trust’ towards an organisation, through interacting with them on social networking sites, they are more likely to do business with that organisation, refer their friends and share their content. They argue that by offering exciting content and engaging potential customers, organisations have an opportunity to provide value to their communication efforts.

Similar to Vodacom (@Vodacom) is FNB (@RBJacobs), a South African bank brand, who were also seen to place high value on immediate communication with their followers. The organisation has been using Twitter as part of their brand and customer service since they joined Twitter in 2008. According to Seggie (2012), in 2012 alone, FNB typically had 15 000 conversations a month, and these were usually with both existing and potential customers on social media. It has between 40% and 50% “share of voice” against competitors, with its nearest competitor being Absa (@ABSA) with 26%. At the time of research, FNB also had an average of 60% positive interactions on their social media platforms as determined through the *Social Mention* application. Given this information this study found that Twitter is one of the communication tools in South Africa that has changed the way information is communicated.

### **Number of followers**

The sampled organisations represented a variety of commercial brands in South Africa (as mentioned in Chapter 4). At the start of the analysis, these organisations had an average of 25, 741 people following their accounts, which ranged from a minimum of 4, 968 followers to a high of 82, 371 followers. This research suggests that the number of followers an organisation

has on Twitter can determine how organisations use Twitter as a communication tool. It was observed that people that were interested in the organisation and supported the brand were visible through the number of followers the brand or organisation had on Twitter. Therefore, it was used to discover the ways in which organisations communicate through Twitter. At the beginning of this study, Woolworths (@WOOLWORTHS\_SA) had the highest following on Twitter (82, 371) while Kalahari.com (@kalaharicom) had the lowest number of followers on Twitter (4, 968). During the two-month sampling period all twelve organisations increased the number of followers they had. At the end of this period Woolworths (@WOOLWORTHS\_SA) still had the highest number of followers at (N= 92, 770) and Kalahari.com (@kalaharicom) still had the lowest with (N= 5, 149).

This information is significant because as Twitter use grows, the influence and reputation of organisations are being associated with their number of Twitter followers. These findings are supported by Cha et al., (2010). When looking at Woolworths (@WOOLWORTHS\_SA) given their number of followers, and using the research by Merrill et al., (2011) this research concludes that Woolworths' advantage comes from their customers' identification with them and their products. It is important for followers and consumers to be able to identify with an organisation or brand, because it increases online interaction with the organisation. Online interaction increases customer loyalty. Being able to claim more than 90 thousand loyal customers is a social media benefit. When looking at the number of followers and using them to measure an organisations influence and reputation Twitter for Business<sup>29</sup> stated a few metrics to consider, which are *Follower growth*: how many new followers a business gets every day, week or month and *Follower quality and engagement*: how many users interact with an organisations account.

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<sup>29</sup> Twitter for business, retrieved: <https://business.twitter.com/en-gb/measure-your-impact>

This illustrates the importance that the number of followers an organisation has with regard to building influence and reputation.

On the other hand, it was found that the number of people the organisations follow (following) and the number of people that follow the organisation (followers) differed between organisations. When it comes to the number of users the organisations followed the twelve organisations reported following fewer users than users that followed them. The organisations followed an average of 2,397 people, which ranged from following a low of 100 users to a high of 4,876 users. For example, Cell C (@CellC) with 29,856 followers only followed 1,108 users and Brutal Fruit with 6,422 followers only followed 153 users. However, Durex (@DurexSA) followed relatively the same number of users that followed them, that is, 7,592 followers and 4,867 following. Similarly, Peironcely (2012) states that the ratio of followers to following defines the kind of user you are.

This study concluded that the number of followers the organisation followed was a demonstration of the kind of interaction they were trying to have with their followers. For example, Durex (@DurexSA) who followed roughly the same amount of people that followed them often engaged with users at a general level. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6; however the organisation essentially became part of users' conversations. They paid attention to trending topics, user comments and tweeted as if they were 'one of them'. Their following count illustrates this as apart from other well-known media publications and brands, their count included ordinary users (their fans and followers) too. On the other hand, Woolworths, (@WOOLWORTHS\_SA), who follow less than half of their follower count engaged with users mostly when users engaged with them. Their following count included mostly well-known media publications and other brands. This determined the kinds of people

that they were interested in monitoring. Woolworths (WOOLWORTHS\_SA) were not the only organisations in the sample with this kind of following; other organisations included Cosmopolitan SA (CosmopolitanSA) and Pick n Pay (@picknpay) among others.

As research question 2 seeks to find out what model of public relations organisations in South Africa is used and whether they reflect Grunig's press agency/publicity model, public information model, two-way asymmetrical model, or two-way symmetrical model of public relations, more of these findings will be addressed in the following chapter.

## **Conclusion**

The data collected in this study revealed that today, organisations in South Africa view Twitter as valuable to their daily practice. These commercial brands are using Twitter more frequently to communicate with their publics today than they were a few years ago. Due to the rising numbers of people that are using social networking sites, as shown in Chapter 3, organisations in South Africa are taking note of the communication benefits that social media and social networking provides them. As many of them are still trying to find effective ways to communicate via these channels, there are still a number of factors that this study used to determine how organisations are communicating with their publics and what type of communication it is. The main features that were found are particularly, how often they tweeted, and their follower and following count. It was their following count that was found as the most important factor in determining what type of communication brands were fostering. This determined the kinds of people that the brands were interested in monitoring and who these brands are trying to foster relationships with, as most of the organisations in the sample followed other brands, and well-known media publications. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the following chapter, Chapter 6 will address the

findings related to research question number 2: how do these brands' tweets reflect Grunig and Hunt's four models of public relations?

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **MODELS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS COMMUNICATION**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, a discussion of Twitter as a communication tool for organisations was provided, highlighting that South African commercial brands are using Twitter more frequently to communicate with their audiences and that the number of tweets and number of followers plays an important role in how these organisations communicate with their publics. This chapter explores the type of communication that organisations have with their followers and will use Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations to determine which communication models are used. The four models of public relations communication (categories for this study) are: press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical.

#### **Findings**

To answer the research question, frequencies of the total (n = 2,000) tweets analysed were run on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations communications. Overall, the study found that the use of the models (in %) are as follows: the most popular model used in the South African context is the public information model with (n = 6, 50%) of the organisations sampled using this model as their dominant approach, which focuses on one-way communication by issuing of accurate information. The second most popular is the two-way asymmetrical with (n = 3, 25%) of the organisations sampled using this model as their dominant approach which focuses on indirect communication between the organisation and its followers. The third most popular model is the press agency with (n = 2, 17%) of the organisations sampled using this model as their dominant approach. Finally, the two-way symmetrical model was used with (n = 1, 8%) of organisations in the sample using this as their dominant approach. A detailed elaboration follows;

As mentioned, the public information (pi) was the most widely used model of all four models. Organisations' tweets using this model (n = 996, 50%) often contain information about the brand's activities or other information that the brands would feel is relevant to their publics. Often, these tweets would read like mini-press releases. Essentially, these tweets were informative without the use of biased or persuasive language. For example,

**Figure 5**



Screenshot, Vodacom tweet (30.09.13)

Information was shared through a variety of different methods using this model, mainly through the use of URLs to the organisation's website (n = 880, 44%), press releases (n = 113, 6%) and images (n = 60, 3%). While most public information tweets contained links, Twitter's hashtag feature (#) was also predominantly found in this model (n = 800, 40%). This is because the hashtag makes news and information dissemination easier on Twitter. The following tweet offers an example of the type of content posted.

**Figure 6**



Screenshot, FNB tweet (18.09.13).

Regarding press agency (pa), organisations were likely to use phrases in their tweets that expressed excitement about a product or service (n = 332, 17%), such as ‘best product ever’, ‘amazing’ or ‘great’, for example,

**Figure 7**



Screenshot, PicknPay tweet (20.08.13)

These tweets were usually delivering promotional content. The majority of press agency tweets, about 86%, contained URLs. Most of these URLs linked to the organisation’s website (n = 286, 14%).

Regarding two-way communication, organisations were more likely to employ the two-way asymmetrical model than the two-way symmetrical model on Twitter. Organisations imploring the two way asymmetrical model (ta) used Twitter to get feedback from the public (n = 498, 25%). These same organisations were also likely to ask users to take part in opinion polls (n = 106, 5%) and/or enter competitions (n = 186, 9%). Some of the tweets in this model included the use of question marks as a way of gaining feedback (n = 73, 4%). For example,

## Figure 8



Screenshot, PicknPay tweet (20.08.13)

However, none of these methods truly engaged with the public. To engage in real conversations on Twitter, organisations had to use the '@' to address specific users. Most of the time an '@' symbol was used in tweets were when organisations attempted to resolve conflict (n = 498, 25%). For example,

## Figure 9



Screenshot, Woolworths SA tweet (7.08.13)

However, of the twelve organisations only one organisation (n = 166, 8%) used Twitter to engage in conversations with their publics. Two-way symmetrical (ts) posts were considered where tweets demonstrated communication efforts to build long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with the public. For example,

**Figure 10**



Screenshot, Durex SA tweet (19.09.13)

**Figure 11**



Screenshot, Durex SA tweet (3.09.13)

When other organisations did engage in conversation, it was with an average of two users a day, and as mentioned it was often in relation to conflict.

Table 3 presents the frequencies with which the four models of public relations are used in South African organisations' Twitter updates.

**Table 3**

*Frequency of organisations' tweets by the four models of public relations. (Number and percentage) of organisations' tweets using various public relations communication models (n = 2,000)*

<u>Content Category</u>	<u>Number &amp; Percentage</u>
<b><i>Press agency (pa)</i></b>	
Use of promotional content	332 (17%)
Persuasion of organisations to followers to take an action	286 (14%)
<b><i>Public information (pi)</i></b>	
Providing information about the brand's activities	996 (50%)
Use of Hashtags	800 (40%)
<b><i>Two-way asymmetrical (ta)</i></b>	
Attempt to get feedback from the public	498 (25%)
Ask users to participate in polls	106 (5%)
Ask users to enter into contests	186 (9%)
<b><i>Two-way symmetrical (ts)</i></b>	
Tweets demonstrated communication efforts to build long-term, mutually beneficial relationships	166 (8%)
Managing conflicts	498 (25%)

Furthermore, while there is a clear distinction between which models were used more often than others, out of the twelve organisations and 2,000 sampled tweets, the findings also showed that the four models of public relations often go hand in hand and can be used in conjunction with one another, as many of the organisations did during the 2 month sample period. That is, organisations did not simply use one method alone in all their tweets/communication.

In addition, of all the Twitter functionality used, URLs were the most popular of Twitter functionalities among South African organisations, with (n= 1,166, 58%) of the total sample using this functionality in the majority of their tweets. Hashtags were the second most popular

Twitter functionalities with (n = 800, 40%) of the total sample using this in their tweets. The use of retweets (RTs) in South African organisations' communication efforts on Twitter were found to be the third most popular functionality, as of the total 2,000 sampled tweets, (n = 614, 31%) featured this functionality. The least popular was the use of the @sign used directly to users that made (n = 498, 25%) of the total sample. Table 4 presents the total frequencies with which the Twitter functionalities are used among South African organisations.

**Table 4**

<i>Total frequencies with which the Twitter functionalities (#, @, RTs and URLs) are used among South African organisations.</i>	
<u>Twitter Functionality</u>	<u>Number &amp; Percentage</u>
URLs	1,166 (58%)
Hashtags (#)	800 (40%)
At-sign (@)	498 (25%)
Retweets (RTs)	614 (31%)

Similarly, the findings also showed that Twitter's functionalities were used concurrently with each other. In particular the hashtag and the URL function.

Overall, the findings of this study have arrived at the same conclusion provided by Holtzhausen et al., (2003), who state that South Africa continues to develop along Western lines as their public relations practice subscribes to international public relations practices. These findings determined that the four models of communication, despite being of international use and having been created decades ago, are still relevant today in the South African context. For example, these findings are comparable to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) own assumptions about how the

models are used, as they suggest that 15% of the organisations practice press agency/publicity, 50% public information, 20% two-way asymmetric and 15% two-way symmetric.

## **Discussion**

### **The Use of These Models on Twitter**

There is no specific or ‘proper’ way to use Twitter. Therefore, it is not surprising how South African organisations are using it. For these organisations Twitter has become a tool for sharing links to existing information, or for promoting new products and services as determined by their dominant use of the public information model. As the objective of the research analysis was to characterise the content of organisations tweets using the already existing communication models provided by Grunig and Hunt (1984), this study suggests that Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) public relations communication models have been enhanced by the use of social media and social networking.

For example, while traditionally the press agency model was used to manipulate and influence audiences through posters and television advertisements, currently on Twitter it proves more useful. While it continues to catch the attention and interests of followers by using exciting, attention-seeking words when offering information about their promotions, new deals and campaigns, this method of tweeting proved useful when organisations were trying to get a particular message across, as it was also discovered that tweets like this often led organisations to greater website traffic. It can be argued that on Twitter this method is helpful to organisations trying to catch the attention of followers among other organisations doing the same thing. A user’s timeline is likely to be saturated with many other brands and organisations seeking the same attention, therefore press agency allows them to stand out. According to Jowett and O’Donnell (2006) this type of action by an organisation is known as organisational propaganda.

The authors define this as “the deliberate and systematic attempt to direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (p. 12). Although the press agency model was used more in the past as propaganda to exaggerate an organisation’s products or services, today, particularly on Twitter, it has been found to entice followers and potential followers to pay attention to an organisation.

### ***Public Information Model***

The fact that half of the sample used the public information model shows that the South African organisations public relations practice complies with the way the practice is intended. That is, public relations roles focus on open communication with the public in providing them with accurate information, as mentioned in Chapter 2 (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). The organisations sampled, for example (@Vodacom), (@CellC) and (@Mediclinic), showed a commitment to providing information in order to build trust with their followers. These organisations simply tweeted relevant and meaningful information that they believed would be valuable to, and interest their publics. Furthermore, within the public information model, organisations would use popular hashtags that their followers would likely be aware of in order to make finding the information easier. Hashtags such as #RTD and #SEXPO (events) were very popular during the two month sample period. These hashtags allowed organisations to provide useful information about themselves in relation to these events. Organisations also created their own hashtags that users would associate with their brand or organisation in order to find information; some examples are #LoveSexDurex (@DurexSA) and #COSMOSex (@CosmopolitanSA).

Additionally, organisations also turned to the public information model when they wanted to enhance their reputation. This model is essential to the public relations practice today, where organisations dealing with a crisis need to deliver honest information regarding the crisis.

### ***Two-way asymmetrical model***

South African communication via Twitter was observed to follow linear communication methods. These conclusions were noted in certain organisations in the sample, Pick n Pay (@picknpay), Kalahari.com (@kalaharicom) and ABSA (@absa) are some examples. One of the reasons for this is that most of these organisations',-and more broadly, South African organisations'- communication efforts are linked to the practice of marketing. Van Riel and Fomburn (2007) define marketing as “the set of activities involved in managing and orchestrating internal and external communications aimed at creating favourable starting points with stakeholders... with the common goal of enhancing the organisations ability to retain its ability to operate” (p. 25). With this definition it is clear why linear models are used. Even though communication is still linear in the two-way asymmetrical model, organisations with this model used feedback from their followers to attempt to change their public's attitudes and behaviours, whether it is to buy a product or support its campaigns. However, this model had its limitation on these organisations, (e.g. Brutal Fruit, @brutalfuitsa, and Kalahari.com, @kalaharicom). It was discovered that the organisations that often used the two-way asymmetrical model generally focused on achieving short-term attitude changes. These attitude changes were either getting people to purchase a product or follow the organisation, but their strategy online did not go any further. It is also why Grunig and Hunt (1984) claim that asymmetrical public relations approaches are intended to produce an effect that “benefits the organisation and not publics” (p. 29).

### ***Two-way symmetrical model***

Organisations in South Africa are still finding challenges in trying to achieve two-way communication via Twitter even though the platform, through the '@' function allows for it. Grunig (2009) claimed that this interaction is the significance of social media on communication. However, this limited use of the '@' function can perhaps highlight the overall

function of Twitter itself, as described by its creators. Twitter is intended to be an information network and South African organisations ultimately use it in this regard. It can be argued that instead, South African organisations may use various other social networks, e.g. Facebook to build relationships and interact with their friends, and use Twitter ultimately to spread information.

When it comes to two-way symmetrical communication South African organisations have also had to face the fact that what is said about their brand online can have direct impact on the organisation's reputation or influence online. The two-way symmetrical model was often used when dealing with such cases, particularly when an organisation had to respond to its followers' complaints or praises. The use of the hashtag was illustrated earlier in relation to the public information model, but the use of the hashtag can also illustrate successful two-way communication on Twitter. Unfortunately the hashtag was not often used for this purpose in this study. When organisations adapt their messages to their audiences, for example by joining in trending topics through hashtags, it improves their chances of communicating successfully. Only one brand, Durex SA (@DurexSA) utilised this tool. The hashtag #replacemovietitleswith was very popular on Twitter during the sample period. Durex SA used this as a way to get trending and get people to talk about their brand by creating their own hashtag #replacemovietitleswithdurex. Furthermore, one of the greatest benefits of an organisation using hashtags is monitoring its brand and publics. Monitoring hashtags will give an organisation an idea of 1) what consumers are saying about their brand 2) when to join conversations 3) when to start a conversation and 4) when to do damage control.

## **Two-way Communication on Social Media**

As mentioned earlier, this study suggests that the use of the two-way symmetrical model is not always the end goal of some organisations, particularly on Twitter, judging from the fact that it was the least used model of the four provided by Grunig and Hunt (1984). However, countless public relations academics have recommended two-way symmetrical communication in public relations practices (e.g. Ihlen & van Ruler, 2007; Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Grunig and Grunig, 2008; Fawkes, 2007). Nevertheless, the results reveal that brand and organisational communication is more complex than those insistent on two-way symmetrical communication suggest. Informational tweets (public information) were used more often than direct conversational tweets (two-way symmetrical), and judging from the number of studies showing that engagement tactics are only sometimes used by public relations practitioners (e.g. Seltzer and Mitrook, 2007; Bortree and Seltzer, 2009), it was not surprising to find that not many South African brands have taken to this approach fully in their communication efforts on Twitter. It is argued that organisations are still using each media, as it does with print and TV, (and now social media) to push forward their own agendas and messages (Heath, 2006). The study therefore concluded that although two-way symmetrical communication may be the most suitable model of public relations, it is not always the required goal of public relations communication.

Instead, this study found that South African organisations understood what having a combination of the communication methods served their communication efforts. It suggests that in order to have successful public relations communication, a mixture of all four models is necessary. While Kent and Taylor (1998) argue that without interaction with their publics, organisations are likely to fall on the back burner, it is clear that the use of these different models play their own role in delivering communication messages effectively and organisations can benefit from using these

models at different times when communicating with their public. There are some communication campaigns that favour one-way messages more than taking a symmetrical approach. There are other times when conversations and negotiation will provide the most gain for an organisation. For example, the two-way symmetrical model can be used during a crisis which would be beneficial in managing the crisis and when a new product or service has been launched, the press agency would be beneficial in creating awareness of that product or service, and so on. Many service delivery brands such as Woolworths (@WOOLWORTHS\_SA), Kalahari.com (@kalaharicom) and Pick n Pay (@picknpay) often used the two-way symmetrical model when communicating through conflict with their followers about their services. Therefore, this study concludes that where one organisation would use one model more than any other, their communication with their followers was lacking elsewhere, particularly on social media where some messages may get lost in a sea of other messages.

At the same time, it cannot be argued that having and creating conversations with followers on social media is not likely to result in long-lasting relationships, as is the point of many public relations strategies (Macnamara, 1996; Jefkins, 1986, Wilcox & Nolte, 1995; Cutlip et al. 2000). One of the brands in the sample (@DurexSA) provided insight into this, as not only did they reply to users' tweets, but they engaged in conversation, joined conversations and sometimes even started them. This brand had the most interaction from users on its Twitter page compared to other brands in this study. This indicates that South African organisations are not as behind compared to the West in trying to build mutually beneficial relationships with their publics on Twitter. However it can be argued that South African organisations either, may not yet have placed a high importance on using social media and social networking sites to communicate mutually with their publics, or have only begun to experience the benefits of social networking to their communication goals and the engagement online is yet to be seen.

## **Conclusion**

It was discovered that the most popular model used in the South African context is the public information model. When comparing the findings of Grunig and Hunt (1984) which show that 15% of the organisations practice press agency/publicity, 50% public information, 20% two-way asymmetric and 15% two-way symmetric, the findings of this study illustrate similar results in that more organisations practice the public information model. Table 4 below illustrates the results with percentages.

**Table 5**

<b>Model</b>	<b>Percentage use in South Africa</b>
<b>Press agency</b>	17%
<b>Public information</b>	50%
<b>Two-way asymmetrical</b>	42%
<b>Two-way symmetrical</b>	8%

Essentially, the above shows that Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations are widely used across the world, including South Africa. It is therefore clear that these communication models suggest the kind of relationships organisations have with their publics. At the same time however, they point out gaps in communication that are not being addressed. South African organisations need to begin to place a higher importance on using social media and social networking to communicate with their publics. It is noted that their communication via Twitter is lacking in areas when it comes to two-way communication and achieving mutual relationships with their publics. As the findings of this study show that many organisations used the four models concurrently, it suggests that in order to have successful public relations communication, a mixture of all four models is necessary. It is clear that these different models

play their own role in delivering communication messages, and organisations can benefit from using these models at different times when communicating with their public. For example, the two-way symmetrical model can be used during a crisis and the press agency when a new product or service has been launched and so on. This is because where one organisation would use one model more than any other, their communication with their followers was lacking elsewhere. Therefore, while many authors suggest that it is the two-way communication model that is the better option for organisations; this study suggests that organisations should develop communication strategies that utilise all the models concurrently as they work better when used together.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PUBLICS ON TWITTER**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter looked at the four models of public relations proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984). It showed that it is necessary for organisations to utilise all four models of public relations in order to achieve successful public relations communication, however, while the use of the models are prevalent, in South Africa, two-way communication efforts are still low at 8% of the organisations sampled using this model as their dominant approach. This study found that South African organisations either have not yet have placed a high importance on using social media and social networking sites to communicate mutually with their publics or have only begun to experience the benefits of social networking to their communication goals and the engagement online is yet to be seen (as stated in the previous chapter). Therefore, this chapter attempts to reveal how brands in South Africa can build relationships with their publics by using Twitter.

#### **Relationships as Central to Public Relations**

After analysing 2,000 tweets from organisations, it was discovered that South African brands, particularly the ones sampled in this study, already have a large following on Twitter. It symbolises that people are already interested in what they have to say and what they have to offer online. Therefore, it can be said that there is potential in the country to use these online platforms, particularly Twitter to communicate mutually with their publics. However, with only 8% of the organisations sampled using the two-way symmetrical model as their dominant approach South African organisations still need to focus on relationship building in online platforms, or possibly Twitter. The number of followers alone cannot simply determine the

popularity of a brand on Twitter (or on social media). For example, in Chapter 5 Woolworths (@WOOLWORTHS\_SA) was mentioned as one of the organisations with the highest number of followers, however, there was little engagement around this Twitter account. The literature review highlighted that engagement is important to public relations, as well as the functionality of Twitter. While there are several ways of achieving engagement (and building relationships) online, this chapter suggests that the South African environment (discussed in Chapter 2) is conducive to communicating through the two-way symmetrical model and building relationships. South African organisations can use it, particularly the principles of *Ubuntu*, to strengthen their engagement online.

### **Ubuntu**

Murithi (2006) talks of *Ubuntu* as an African way of viewing the world. It is a worldview that tries to capture the meaning of what it is to be human. *Ubuntu* means that people are people through other people. It also recognises both the privileges and responsibilities of every citizen in encouraging individual and societal well-being (Louw, 2006; Mbigi, 1997; Venter, 2004). The notion is popular throughout several African countries but the term *Ubuntu* is especially used in South Africa, deriving from the Zulu/Xhosa phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, while other countries use a different word to describe the same notion. Researchers, for example, Fabian, (2001) are becoming increasingly aware of the value of *Ubuntu* in their area of study, whether it be in healthcare, community relations, business management or communication. One of the foundations of the increasing awareness of the importance of *Ubuntu* has been the way it has been publicised as a new management concept in management literature in South Africa (see Mbjigi & Maree, 1995; Karsten & Illa, 2005; Mbigi, 1997).

Jackson (2004) states that *Ubuntu* has the potential to shape the relationship between organisations and their wider audiences. The general conclusion is that organisations that reflect *Ubuntu* principles are noticeable by their humanity and team spirit. Related to this is the appreciation that *Ubuntu* has some degree of cultural specificity. According to Karsten and Illa's (2005) analysis of *Ubuntu* in organisational contexts, it places greater emphasis on conversational communication and favours a more participative interaction between management and staff. Most of the literature discussed relates to organisational management and communication in offline contexts and within organisations. However, much can be learned from these theories when applied to communication between organisations and their publics in online contexts. The same principles apply. *Ubuntu* as an organisational concept suggests more than just employee participation, it is the label that covers the way an organisation interacts and shares its experiences (Karsten & Illa, 2005). *Ubuntu* therefore attempts to reach further than a purely managerial approach and strengthens open conversations like Habermas (1987) argues.

### **Relationships and Ubuntu**

Due to the fact that engagement is highlighted as important to public relations and social media (e.g. Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Ito, 2008) one way that South African organisations can put the public at the centre of their practice is through practicing the culture of *Ubuntu* (mentioned in Chapter 2), because as social media encourages collaboration with others through others, and *Ubuntu* posits that a person is a person through other persons, it is arguably a cultural characteristic that is beneficial to using the two-way symmetrical model which encourages interaction between an organisation and its publics. Furthermore, *Ubuntu* emphasises the importance of people, and helps in building relationships, which is why this chapter looks at this aspect of public relations in South Africa and how South African organisations, through public relations, can build relationships with publics on Twitter. It is important to note that this by no

means suggests that non-South African organisations do not embody principles of *Ubuntu*. In fact, as one function of Twitter by organisations is to ensure dialogic flows of information with consumers, every organisation using Twitter or social media can in effect communicate under the principles of *Ubuntu*. However, this section suggests that from the findings in the previous chapter (South African organisations have not taken up the two-way symmetrical approach much in their communication efforts with their publics) and the practice of *Ubuntu* being conducive to communicating through the two-way symmetrical model, its cultural nature of communication in the country can be used as an analysis to determine how brands in South Africa can build relationships with their publics using Twitter, or more broadly social media.

### **Building Relationships via Twitter**

As mentioned in Chapter 5 meaningful interaction on social media by brands is likely to garner support of the brand by their followers and friends, that do business with that organisation, refer their friends and share their content (Merrill et al., 2011). In order for South Africa organisations to build such relations and incorporate more two-way communication, a few ideas can be addressed. Mbigi and Maree (1995) recommended principles that embody *Ubuntu*, (trust and interdependence), even though these principles were intended to address the challenges experienced by South African organisations in the 90s *within* organisations, they can be used to determine how brands in South Africa can build relationships with their publics in online environments today.

#### *(i) Trust*

An organisation cannot reach its potential without the trust of their consumers (Mbigi & Maree, 1995; McFarlin & Coster, 1999). Trust in an organisation builds the credibility needed for it to function. Therefore, before real consumer engagement can occur, organisations must first build a

social media dialogue that leads to a trusting relationship. It can increase the positive effects that their followers have on their brand and their product (Fournier & Avery, 2011). South African organisations using Twitter should keep this in mind when communicating. Not only should they be trying to get an awareness of their products and services out there (press agency, public information), but they should be seeking dialogue that calls for consumer participation and encourage consumers to engage with them. Traditional communication places an importance on information transmission. In the *Ubuntu* context, however, conversation is emphasised, with importance given to establishing and reinforcing relationships (Mangaliso & Damane, 2001). By creating meaningful content South African organisations would encourage trust with their brands. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the content that gets the most engagement in South Africa is *emotional content*; content that triggers emotions out of the audience whether happy or sad, *shock content*; content that surprises or seems surreal, *news content*; trending news, *charity work* and *animals*. South African organisations need to use the knowledge about their followers to create content that catches their interest and leads them to share it with their friends (Scott, 2009). Safko and Brake (2009) discuss ways in which organisations can engage online communities, and similarly they argue that organisations can use content to communicate with its audience, facilitate collaboration with or among its audience, educate its audience, or entertain its audience. This can lead to more two-way communication for South African organisations and their publics.

(ii) *Interdependence*

The concept of interdependence by Mbigi and Maree (1995), argues that organisational wealth is best achieved by a humanistic approach to business that emphasises supportive relations among members of the community. The phrase “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (a person is a person through other human beings) captures this idea. South African organisations should focus their

public relations communication efforts on communities. While there are uses on Twitter for models like the press agency, two-way asymmetrical and public information model (as they have shown), it is important according to Perdue (2010) that online communication should not just be about targeting masses with promotional content, but should be about connecting with groups of people. Hunt (2009) shares similar sentiments. According to the author:

Today we can narrow our markets down to an even more personal level because people often publish their preferences very explicitly in online social networks. Some social media consultants are calling the further narrowing of this profiling *socialgraphics*—the segmenting of people through what kind of groups they join, preferences they publish on social networks, the content of their public wish lists, and what they discuss with their friends in online communities (p. 125).

To begin to achieve this kind of connection South African organisations can share information from other users' Twitter accounts to show that they are interested in fostering relationships and are not only focused on themselves but are open to listening and engaging with others in their network (whether it is other brands or other users). Retweeting (RT), or sharing information from others can help build a social network community, even around a brand. However, not many of the sampled brands used the retweet function (as determined through analysis). Furthermore, if organisations share content from others, it is likely to be reciprocated by others when these organisations share their own updates. This is another method that can lead to more two-way communication for South African organisations and their publics.

Furthermore, in an *Ubuntu* context, there is an importance of language in creating a sense of community. South African organisations are confronted with challenges in terms of the number of languages (du Plessis & Boon, 2004). Having eleven official languages spoken in South Africa, organisations must take these language differences into account when communicating. According to du Plessis and Boon (2004), in organisational communication, English, and to a

smaller extent Afrikaans, dominate as the medium of communication, as witnessed through the sampled tweets. Taking into account language differences will differ from organisation to organisation, depending on various target audiences, when and if it calls for it organisations and brands can incorporate these different languages into their communication efforts depending on the messages they are trying to get across. According to Lazarus (2004) language, encourages cooperation and celebrates unity. Organisations that can provide an opportunity for their consumers to give expression to their cultures and beliefs in the course of them carrying out their organisational goals are likely to gain competitive advantage over those that do not, and are likely to form mutually beneficial relationships. Furthermore, Christians (2004) states that there are three ways that *Ubuntu* help communication practices. Firstly, it makes sure that the focus of communication remains on humans; secondly, it prevents communication from being collectivistic; and thirdly, it makes the truthful element of communication inevitable.

### **What it means?**

Even though it was discovered that South African communication develops along Western lines with their public relations practice subscribing to international public relations practices, if these organisations used the *Ubuntu* model highlighting principles such as the ones provided by Mbigi and Maree (1995), instead of just informing their publics about their brands, they may begin to utilise the functionality of Twitter, namely, engagement, conversation and sharing to garner valuable, mutual and beneficial relationships with their publics. The examples provided above were only a few, as there are more principles to *Ubuntu* than those provided by Mbigi and Maree (1995), however these examples offer insights into how organisations can use Twitter for their public relations practices.

## **Conclusion**

There is still a long way to go before the use of Twitter by commercial organisations can be seen as an effective public relations tool in South Africa, mainly due to the lack of two-way communication by South African organisations with their publics. When South African organisations utilise the functionality of Twitter, e.g. @s and RTs, to achieve engagement, conversation and sharing, they are likely to reap the benefits of having valuable, mutual and beneficial relationships with their publics. The above discussion highlights several opportunities that organisations need to be creating for themselves, as most of their feedback can come in these forms. Therefore, South African organisations need to learn to foster these relationships in online spaces.

The next chapter concludes this study, and summarises all the findings.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter restates the main purpose of this study and draws together all the findings and conclusions of the research. This chapter also discusses the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research. The purpose of the study was to understand and address the current public relations practice in South Africa, particularly social media and how it is used. Essentially, the study set out to identify the trends in the application of Twitter in South African public relations practice. This study draws broadly on existing literature in the areas of social media and public relations in an attempt to contribute to the literature, particularly in a South African context. The study aimed to highlight the practice of public relations in a developing country in order to add to existing literature on public relations in developing countries and to allow for comparison to public relations practices in the West. Essentially, the findings of the study are intended to assist public relations practitioners and organisations by illustrating how social media is and can be used in their communication practices.

The research set out to determine 1) how commercial brands in South Africa use Twitter as a communication tool 2) how South African organisations' tweets reflect Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations and 3) how these commercial brands can build relationships with their consumers by using Twitter. Organisations in South Africa view Twitter as valuable to their daily practice in order for them to keep up with their followers and allow their followers to keep up with them. The results show a significant change in how South African organisations viewed and used Twitter since 2010. Due to the rising numbers of people that are using social networking sites, as was highlighted in Chapter 3, organisations in South Africa are taking note of the communication benefits that social media and social networking

provides them. As many of them are still trying to find effective ways to communicate via these channels, there are still a number of factors that this study used to determine how organisations are communicating with their publics and what type of communication it is. The main features that were found are particularly, how often they tweeted, and their follower and following count. It was their following count that was found as the most important factor in determining what type of communication brands were fostering. This determined the kinds of people that the brands were interested in monitoring and who these brands are trying to foster relationships with, as most of the organisations in the sample followed other brands, and well-known media publications.

As Twitter is increasingly becoming a tool for organisational communication, its use by organisations serves numerous organisational communication needs. South African organisations used Twitter to promote their products, spread information, seek feedback and build relationships, however in varied amounts. The most popular model used in the South African context is the public information model, followed by the two-way asymmetrical model, then the press agency model and lastly the two-way symmetrical model. These results are comparable to research done by Grunig and Hunt (1984). This shows that organisations have more to their communicative strategies than solely being focused on interactivity and conversation. It can be argued that each of the organisations sampled highlighted the different ways in which different organisations communicate in the different industries in the country. The types of tweets (and models) that these organisations send out to their publics differed because each organisation represented something different.

As far as each model is concerned, the press agency model is not used by many South African organisations. Out of a sample of twelve, only two (17%) organisations used this model as their

dominant approach. However, the press agency model is received better on Twitter compared to traditional methods as it is often compared to propaganda and its negative uses. This method of tweeting proved useful when organisations were trying to get a particular message across, as it was also discovered that tweets like this often led organisations to greater website traffic through the use of URLs.

The public information model was the main communication model used by organisations in their public relations efforts. This follows the idea that South African organisations have a duty to inform the public about what is going on in their organisations. Out of the twelve organisations sampled six organisations (50%) used the public information model as their dominant approach. This is because the public information model lies at the heart of public relations in that it is important to be open with the public and provide them with relevant and truthful information. South African organisations used hashtags (#) more than any other Twitter function, apart from URLs. This contributes to the use of the public information model because information about the organisation with a hashtag made information easier to find.

Organisations turned to the two-way asymmetrical model when they wanted to market their products or services. This is why it is the second most popular approach to public relations communication in South Africa, with four organisations sampled (42%) using this as their dominant approach. Organisations took to this approach on Twitter often, especially when they intended to get feedback. However, this communication model provided limitations to organisations, as it was often ineffective to their followers and aimed to only achieve short-term attitude changes.

Lastly, South African organisations did not achieve two-way symmetrical communication as well or as much as they did the other three models. Out of the twelve organisations sampled, only one was successful. Two-way communication represents more than just replying to a tweet - it represents engaging with users before they have engaged with you and learning from what others tweet to you and about you. Many South African organisations did not use this opportunity. There is still an imbalance when it comes to South African organisations communicating successfully through two-way symmetrical communication.

In order to have successful public relations communication, a mixture of all four models is necessary. Therefore, while many authors suggest that it is the two-way communication model that is the better option for organisations; this study suggests that organisations should develop communication strategies that utilise all the models concurrently as they work better when used together. Essentially, Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations are widely used across the world, including South Africa. It is therefore clear that these communication models suggest the kind of relationships organisations have with their publics. At the same time however, they point out gaps in communication that are not being addressed. South African organisations need to begin to place more of a high importance on using social media and social networking to communicate with their publics. It is noted that their communication via Twitter is lacking in areas when it comes to two-way communication and achieving mutual relationships with their publics.

The third part of the study sought to find out how commercial organisations can build relationships with their followers on Twitter through public relations. Relationship management is important for South African organisations to pay attention to. Organisations can use principles of *Ubuntu* to allow them to lead to more two-way communication with their publics. Even

though South African communication develops along Western lines, if these organisations could use *Ubuntu* principles instead of just using the public information, two-way asymmetrical and press agency models, they may begin to utilise the functionality of Twitter (namely, @s and RTs) to achieve engagement, conversation and sharing and in turn form valuable, mutual and beneficial relationships with their publics. Social media platforms like Twitter provide new opportunities for organisations to reach publics directly despite the potential for the organisation-media relationship. South African organisations have yet to fully take advantage of this feature and put the consumer at the forefront of their communication. When South African organisations can utilise all the functionality of Twitter they can be successful in two-way communication. Therefore, South African organisations need to learn to foster relationships in online spaces.

### **Limitations of Study**

The thesis dealt with communication in the organisational context but the thesis was only limited to public relations. Other communication practices such as marketing and advertising were not fully considered as this was beyond the scope of the present study. Furthermore, the thesis mainly used the models of public relations by Grunig and Hunt (1984) and did not include any other aspects that might explain the different types of communication in public relations besides *Ubuntu*. Even though this thesis was set in South Africa, it proved a limitation to the thesis as the sample of organisations was limited to South Africa and results could not be generalised to the rest of the continent due to a range of factors including but not limited to access to the Internet and country statistics. Other limitations of the thesis included a short study period and a fairly small sample group excluding some industries such as the entertainment industry. Having said this, even though the sample was fairly small, it was felt to be representative of a range of the major commercial brands in South Africa in such categories of mobile networks, banking, food and grocery, alcoholic beverages, health and public safety, media and publishing as well as

online shopping. Moreover, tweets over the two month period selected were found to be very similar to tweets over other periods in the year. The selection of only two month worth of tweets was felt to be a representative sample of the tweets of each of the twelve organisations studied. Additionally, there are many commercial South African businesses which use Twitter. Studying all of them would not necessarily yield any additional data as they all tend to communicate along similar patterns.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As this thesis used a relatively small sample, it recommends that any future similar studies should be repeated with a larger sample size. This is because this thesis only focused on how public relations is used in the organisational context, however, the public relations practice in South Africa grows every day to include a number of different political and educational aspects. There are also currently a growing number of independent public relations practitioners as a business/organisation on its own, therefore future studies should also include these aspects of the public relations practice as part of the sample. This could widen the findings and create a fuller picture of the public relations practice in South Africa. Furthermore, similar research could also benefit in having a more defined sample, focused exclusively on Twitter adaption by a particular sector, for example the banking industry or retail industry, as this might produce different and more detailed results.

There is room for a wider use for qualitative methods to similar studies, such as interviews and questionnaires. These methods allow for more personal information and can answer in detail the 'why' questions that might not be achieved through quantitative methods. A content analysis only takes the understanding of communication practices currently. Although the snapshot approach was intended to show the current use of Twitter in the public relations practice in

South Africa, the method has some weaknesses that do not allow researchers to understand the motivations that go into using Twitter. Only assumptions can be made.

Even though there are a number of social networking sites growing every day, Twitter should still be monitored for its use in South Africa, particularly for its role in promoting communication. At the same time, to provide a broader analysis of how public relations practitioners in South Africa use social media in their practice, future research could focus on other social networking sites that are often used in South Africa, such as Facebook.

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