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Navigating Consumer Engagement during COVID-19: The Case of a Fast-Food Chain in South Africa

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Abstract

Like many sectors, the South African fast-food market was adversely affected by the country's first COVID-19 "lockdown," with franchises forced to close or only partially operate between March and June of 2020. Fast-food establishments are significant contributors to South Africa's food and beverages sector, and their closure during the stringent lockdown periods had a critical economic impact. Furthermore, during the hard lockdown, misinformation about fast-food operations increased, with public relations (PR) practitioners often needing social media to engage with consumers more effectively. This study explores how PR practitioners in a specific South African fast-food franchise used social media during the hard lockdown in 2020. Stakeholder theory and the two-way symmetrical model frame this qualitative study, with data gathered through interviews and analysed using thematic content analysis. Results indicate that the PR team in the selected franchise used social media on an ad hoc basis for crisis communication, sharing information about the franchise's corporate social initiatives, reputation management, and the prevention of misinformation.

Keywords: COVID-19; crisis communication; fast-food franchises; public relations; social media; stakeholder engagement; symmetrical communication



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Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic affected all regions with active cases (Baber 2020). Originating in Wuhan, China, in November 2019, this deadly respiratory disease quickly spread across the globe (Tang, Comish, and Kang 2020), resulting in more than six million deaths by July 2022 (Worldometer 2022). COVID-19 also impacted the economies of affected countries (McKibbin and Fernando 2020), with establishments such as fast-food franchises considered “non-essential” required to close during stricter lockdown periods (Battersby 2020). South Africa’s only industries considered “essential” included medical services, the media, grocery outlets, transportation services, disaster management services, production and manufacturing, and electricity, water, and fuel production services, among others (South African Government 2020a).

During the different lockdown periods in 2020, there was confusion about fast-food companies being operational during specific periods and whether it was permissible for any business to sell prepared foods (Lebuso 2022; Njilo 2020). Some fast-food companies could operate from as early as April 2020, with others required to remain closed until June of that year (Battersby 2020; Business Insider SA 2020). Owing to the misinformation around organisational operations (Njilo 2020), it was vital for public relations (PR) practitioners in these franchises to effectively utilise social media to engage with consumers, who are essential, functional stakeholders of these companies (Grunig and Hunt 1984; Rawlins 2006). In addition to engaging with consumers for informational purposes, as suggested by Camilleri (2021) and Huang et al. (2023), it was also fundamental for these practitioners to communicate interactively about matters of importance to this stakeholder group to continue building positive relationships with them when the franchise was closed.

PR practitioners are influential organisational communicators who link a business with the outside world (Gilaninia, Taleghani, and Mohammadi 2013). They play a critical role in relationship building, symmetrical engagement, and strategic communication (Grunig 2006, 2009; Grunig and Kim 2021; Ledingham 2003; Steyn 2011), which made them essential to interactions with key stakeholder groups during the hard lockdown.

With (public) interpersonal contact prohibited during the stricter lockdown levels, PR practitioners in fast-food companies needed to rely on social media to communicate critical organisational messages to consumers and engage about matters these stakeholders cared about (Camilleri 2021). This study focuses on two-way communication, and we have thus adopted Bishop’s (2019) definition of social media and refer to these online platforms as tools to facilitate symmetrical engagement between people.

Our article qualitatively explores how the PR team in a popular South African fast-food franchise used social media to engage with consumers during levels five, four, and three of the lockdown in 2020. The franchise is not named and referred to as “Company X” throughout this study because of the ethical stipulations of this research. In this study,

we ascertain which social media platforms the PR team in the selected franchise used and why specific platforms were primarily used. We further explore which messages the PR team focused on sending consumers during the three lockdown levels studied. Lastly, we discuss the extent to which the PR team engaged in symmetrical communication with consumers during the COVID-19 lockdown. By adopting Taylor's (2018) definition in this study, we define "stakeholder-inclusive," symmetrical engagement as feedback-driven communication between the selected company and its consumers, which aids in the building of mutually beneficial relationships between the franchise and these constituents.

Our primary research question is: How did the PR practitioners in a selected South African fast-food company use social media to engage with consumers during the stricter lockdown levels in 2020? In the context of this article, "strict" and "hard" lockdown refers to alert levels five, four, and three, when fast-food companies were either entirely or partially restricted from operations since they were not considered emergency services.

In what follows, we contextualise this study and explain its significance to the COVID-19 health crisis. We then discuss literature related to the topic and describe the research setting. After discussing the theoretical framework and methodology, we present the study results, discuss our interpretations, and recommend avenues for future research.

This study contributes to additional scholarly debate on the use of social media by PR practitioners in a specific market. Future researchers may build on this work using multiple cases, comparing the diverse engagement techniques of various fast-food companies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background and Context

After the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) reported that the country had its first positive case of COVID-19 in early March 2020 (NICD 2020), infections steadily increased. Weeks later, the country's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, instituted a level-five lockdown (South African Government 2020a; De Groot and Lemanski 2021). The "lockdown" referred to the emergency health protocols implemented by the national government during the pandemic (Battersby 2020; SA Coronavirus Online Resource and News Portal 2020) and had five alert levels instituted at various stages in 2020.

During lockdown levels five and four—from 27 March to the end of May 2020—people could largely only leave their homes to purchase essential items or when they needed medical treatment (Battersby 2020; South African Government 2020a, 2020b; Ward 2020). Most fast-food companies could reopen during alert level three (in June 2020), with consumers required to remain 1.5 metres away from each other and wear masks

upon entering these establishments (Greer et al. 2021; Jaja, Anyawu, and Jaja 2020; South African Government 2020b).

During the hard lockdown, misinformation proliferated online about COVID-19 and the operational protocols of fast-food companies and other non-essential establishments, with many people confused about when specific businesses would reopen (Barua et al. 2020; Business Insider SA 2020; Greer et al. 2021; Lebuso 2022; Njilo 2020; Schmidt et al. 2020). Misinformation is the propagation of fabricated information, with disinformation denoting the deliberate spreading of unverified data (Allcott, Gentzkow, and Yu 2019; Nguyen and Catalan-Matamoros 2020).

Timely stakeholder communication facilitated by PR practitioners on social media was essential during the hard lockdown (Camilleri 2021). In the present study, the term “stakeholder,” which denotes any person, group, or environment that could affect the functioning and longevity of an organisation (Freeman 1984; Freeman and McVea 2001), is used interchangeably with the terms “constituent,” “vested party,” and “vested group.” Consumers are functional external stakeholders to fast-food franchises and, therefore, consistent engagement with this vested group is essential (Camilleri 2021; Grunig and Hunt 1984; Rawlins 2006). This study focuses on the social media engagement strategies employed by the selected fast-food case in their interactions with consumers during the hard lockdown in 2020.

Literature Review

The PR discipline has undergone significant transformation over the years, evolving from being inherently manipulative to catalysing engagement between a company and its key stakeholders (Clark 2000; Grunig and Kim, 2021). This non-systematic literature review is organised thematically and explores how social media has impacted PR practitioners’ engagement with diverse constituents, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consumer Engagement during Lockdown

Due to the oft-perplexing guidelines regulating the lockdown protocols of fast-food franchises (Nhamo, Dube, and Chikodzi 2020; Njilo 2020; South African Government 2020a), it was important for PR teams in these establishments to engage with consumers interactively (Camilleri 2021). In addition to these non-essential companies engaging with consumers for practical purposes, regular interaction, facilitated by PR professionals, was also crucial for maintaining relationships with these essential constituents (El Kasim and Idid 2017).

As previously mentioned, consistent consumer engagement was especially pertinent during the hard lockdown periods of the pandemic, with social networks used as vital tools for these interactions (Chen, Riantama, and Chen 2021). Utilising social media during the lockdown also helped fast-food franchises give a “voice” to their consumers,

which, in turn, helped managers mine data on the overall satisfaction of these stakeholders (Chen, Riantama, and Chen 2021). Consumer engagement is a multifaceted concept, including many communication strategies employed by the marketing mix (Gavilanes, Flatten, and Brettel 2018). However, in our study, this construct is clearly defined as engagement between Company X and consumers on Facebook and Twitter (now known as X) during a specific period in 2020. While earlier studies, such as that of Long (2011), have explored social media as a consumer engagement tool, PR professionals often do not effectively utilise these platforms to build consumer connections.

Impact of Social Media on Stakeholder Engagement

The rise in social media use has significantly impacted how people engage with businesses (Capriotti, Zeler, and Camilleri 2021; Lipschultz 2018). With these online platforms' fast-paced, collaborative nature, more emotive, two-way communication is possible between organisations and their key stakeholders (Camilleri 2021). Similarly, various authors (Dolan et al. 2019; Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp 2015; Wang, Yu, and Wei 2012) note that social networking sites have also given power back to consumers and changed the way they interact with organisations. As a result, more symmetrical communication is possible and necessary for relationship building (Hoffman and Lutz 2014).

Coombs (2007) and Capriotti, Zeler, and Camilleri (2021) recommend that PR practitioners use these platforms to build the reputations of the organisations they work with and manage relationships with vested parties *before* organisational crises occur. Du Plessis (2018) agrees but argues that an organisation's PR team could also use social media to build connections with constituents *during* crises, leading to beneficial, longstanding relationships between these parties and the relevant companies.

Some authors, such as Komodromos (2014), do, however, argue that many PR practitioners prefer social media engagement roles to be played by outsourced specialists or digital managers in an organisation. Komodromos's (2014) study is in contrast with Neill and Lee (2016) and Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018). They note that the increased use of social media has completely transformed the way practitioners engage with stakeholders, with these platforms creating new roles for PR professionals.

While the proliferation of social media has empowered consumers to share their experiences with certain brands (Barnes 2008), practitioners must monitor these channels consistently owing to their fast-paced nature. Furthermore, organisations must know their key audiences when engaging with stakeholders online to create targeted, meaningful dialogues with these groups (Bourne 2016).

Therefore, the use of social media in the PR discipline remains an anomaly, with no consistent framework governing how practitioners should (ideally) use these online platforms (Capriotti, Zeler, and Camilleri 2021). Furthermore, some researchers argue

that using these platforms for stakeholder engagement has been overly praised and insufficiently critiqued (Valentini 2015).

Social Media Use by PR Practitioners

Kent and Li (2020) argue that the proliferation of social networking platforms has meant that traditional, long-form PR practices must be altered. Similarly, Grunig (2009) and Grunig and Kim (2021) argue that social media could potentially help the PR function become more strategic and dialogic. An abundance of social media literature regarding public relations has focused on effective brand and relationship building, crisis communication, fundraising attempts, information dissemination, and influencer partnerships (Kent and Li 2020; Mavimbela et al. 2018; Neill and Lee 2016). Crisis communication is a key theme discussed in the findings. In this study, we have defined this concept as the emergency systems and protocols employed by the PR team in a company during crises and other threatening conditions an organisation faces (Coombs 2007).

However, while some professionals value social media, many have not truly embraced the myriad opportunities presented by these platforms (Becker and Lee 2018; Joo and Teng 2016). In an exploratory cross-case study by Robson and James (2013), five PR professionals noted that they did not utilise social media strategically and only used these online networks on an ad hoc basis. Not much has changed since then, with Mavimbela et al. (2018) and Capriotti, Zeler, and Camilleri (2021) finding that while some PR practitioners use social media regularly, others only use them occasionally, with utilisation varying from organisation to organisation.

Fast-Food Brands and Social Media

In the fast-food market, practitioners can use social networks for crisis communication, brand-building opportunities, and interactive engagement (Alrawabdeh et al. 2020; Civelek, Çemberci, and Eralp 2016; Fondevila-Gascón et al. 2017; Guidry et al. 2015; Zhu, Anagondahalli, and Zhang 2017). Additionally, Kim and Ramos (2018) argue that professionals in the fast-food market can use social media to build relationships with consumers and other critical stakeholders by engaging with them about their organisations' corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Morsing and Schultz (2006) and Dodo et al. (2016) note that using diverse platforms to engage symmetrically about CSR initiatives is a central way for PR practitioners to foster trust and relationships with stakeholders.

During stricter lockdown periods, it was vital for PR practitioners to find innovative ways of engaging with stakeholders and managing communication crises online (Camilleri and Isaias 2021; Wong et al. 2020). Furthermore, with the proliferation of misinformation during the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, it was essential for practitioners to monitor social media to defuse fake news about their organisations (Barua et al. 2020; Cinelli et al. 2020; Staunton, Swanepoel, and Labuschagne 2020).

Research Setting

The selected company is a popular South African fast-food franchise established in the late 1980s in Johannesburg and which currently has more than 300 active branches across the country (Whichfranchise, n.d.). The franchise also has more than 1000 stores operating in over thirty regions globally (Whichfranchise, n.d.). The business is renowned for its socially responsible practices (Wachira et al. 2020). Pertinent examples of this are the company's sourcing of local artworks to decorate each restaurant and their use of small subsistence farms to supply the chillies used in the sauce for which the establishment is famous (Whichfranchise, n.d.).

These are just two examples of its CSR initiatives involving diverse stakeholder groups. Various authors (Carroll 1999; Fernando, Scott, and Munichiello 2021; He and Harris 2020; Hopkins 2014) define CSR as a form of organisational self-regulation, with businesses required to be cognisant of their responsibilities towards the economy, their stakeholders, the environment, and communities affected by the existence of an organisation. CSR and stakeholder theory also have an interconnected relationship, with both concepts emphasising the importance of businesses considering various constituents' needs and not focusing exclusively on profit maximisation (Dmytriiev, Freeman, and Hörisch 2021). CSR and stakeholder-inclusive engagements are also two critical themes discussed in the findings of this work.

In addition to being one of South Africa's most-loved fast-food franchises, the selected company is renowned for its witty and interactive engagements with various stakeholder groups online (Igumbor et al. 2012). The franchise rarely shies away from using social media in a fun, tongue-in-cheek way to address issues that affect South African consumers. The case company was thus purposively selected because it is a renowned South African brand, well-known for its witticisms online.

An Integrated Marketing Team

Although the selected franchise is large, its PR team is small, consisting of only two internal team members. The franchise also has a separate digital team comprising two people who work alongside the PR department. The PR and digital teams share dovetailing roles, with both departments utilising specialist external companies to carry out specific tactical tasks.

The internal digital team works alongside two outsourced companies, one of which is responsible for tongue-in-cheek engagements on social media. The other is primarily responsible for responding to complaints online. Two members of the former digital team are sampled in this work. Similarly, the internal PR team works alongside an external agency. This agency partner carries out "traditional" PR functions, such as managing crisis communication, distributing press releases, and building stakeholder relationships (Grunig 2006).

Although lean, the marketing mix within the selected franchise is unified, with integrated marketing communication (IMC) practiced in the organisation. Hallahan (2007) and Thabit and Raewf (2018) explain that the marketing mix refers to the various communication departments that help a company achieve its targets. Furthermore, IMC refers to incorporating various communication functions to convey messaging that reflects the identity of a brand across diverse media platforms (Naumovska and Blazeska 2016; Valos et al. 2016). Van Riel (1995) and Kitchen and Burgmann (2010) argue that the strategic incorporation of IMC practices benefits a company, creating more collaboration and cooperation between different departments to ensure that organisational communication is cohesive.

Theoretical Framework

This research used stakeholder theory and the two-way symmetrical model to structure the study and interpret its results.

Applicability of Stakeholder Theory

According to stakeholder theory, all establishments have mutually reliant relationships with various internal and external parties. These relationships can affect organisational functioning, either directly or inadvertently, and are also impacted by an establishment's existence (Freeman 1984; Freeman and McVea 2001; Parmar et al. 2010). Stakeholder theory suggests that for a business to be successful holistically, mutual value-creation for organisations and stakeholders is needed (D'Souza 2021; Freeman 2010; Signori et al. 2021). To that end, stakeholder theory can be applied to any organisation, including fast-food establishments. Alrawabdeh et al. (2020) noted that its adoption in these franchises is essential in rebuilding trust during organisational crises.

As discussed earlier, the underlying theme in this study is consumer engagement on social media. Therefore, applying stakeholder theory to this study enabled us to thoroughly analyse the interconnected relationships between the selected franchise and its consumers. We use the theory to describe the "type" of stakeholders consumers are, providing additional justification for the relevance of exploring the engagements between the establishment and this specific constituent group.

Classification of Consumers

There are several ways of categorising stakeholders (Rawlins 2006). However, we have decided to classify the franchise's consumers as "functional" stakeholders, per Grunig and Hunt's (1984) linkage map. We used this map to offer an adaptable stakeholder classification system that can be adjusted as an organisation advances over time (Grunig and Hunt 1984; Plowman and Rawlins 2017; Rawlins 2006). According to the linkage map, functional linkages are stakeholders without whom a company would cease to exist because they either use a business's outputs or produce goods and services.

Therefore, a consumer is one example of a functional connection regarding outputs (Plowman and Rawlins 2017).

Grunig and Hunt's (1984) linkage map depicts the four critical connections of an organisation as either "enabling," "functional," "diffused," or "normative":

- Enabling linkages are stakeholders who are influential in a company.
- Normative linkages refer to groups an establishment shares similar values with.
- Diffused linkages are groups that do not consistently interact with a company.
- Functional linkages are essential for a company's operations.

Figure 1 illustrates Grunig and Hunt's (1984) linkage map and provides examples of constituents which form part of specific stakeholder categories.

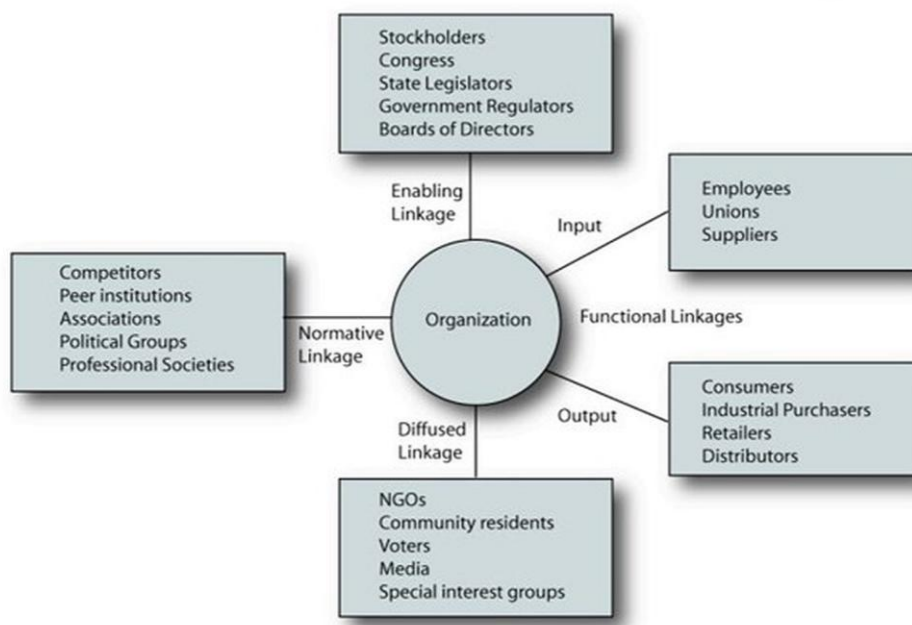


Figure 1: Grunig and Hunt's (1984, 141) linkage map depicts the various links stakeholders have to a company

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model

The two-way symmetrical model has been instrumental to this study, supporting a vital research construct: feedback-driven engagement between the franchise and its consumers, catalysed by PR professionals (Grunig and Hunt 1984). When using this

model, practitioners facilitate interactive, feedback-driven engagements between their client companies and key vested parties by listening to and being cognisant of their needs (see Grunig 2006). This model is primarily used to build relationships between a company and its key constituents, foster trust with key organisational stakeholders, and resolve crises with various parties (Grunig and Hunt 1984).

The two-way symmetrical model is often considered the most ethical dialogic system out of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four communication typologies. While the "public information" model has also been considered a viable and pragmatic engagement typology, this type of communication is one-way, where practitioners focus on disseminating essential data and not on feedback-driven interactions (Grunig and Hunt 1984; Suyono and Hanathasia 2014).

Despite both stakeholder theory and the two-way model being conceptualised more than 30 years ago, these concepts are still applicable in the PR domain and research related to it (Du Plessis 2018; Hörisch, Schaltegger, and Freeman 2020; Morsing and Schultz 2006).

Both stakeholder theory and the two-way symmetrical model have received criticism over the years. Stakeholder theory has, for example, often been criticised for its inherent plurality (Hendry 2001; Jepsen and Eskerod 2009), with the two-way model criticised for its perceived depiction of idealistic PR practices (Holtzhausen 2000; Motion and Weaver 2005). However, we maintain that both concepts have been fundamental to this study, focusing on stakeholder engagements on social media and the role of the franchise's PR practitioners therein.

Methods

This qualitative study is interpretivist, with data gathered to explore the experiences and viewpoints of participants connected to the selected franchise. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research is primarily exploratory (Dawson 2009). Daymon and Holloway (2011) argue that it is helpful for scholars to employ this approach when conducting research related to public relations because it allows for a thorough analysis of the transformation of communication practices in the discipline. The qualitative approach was also recently adopted by Capriotti, Zeler, and Camilleri (2021) and Mavimbela et al. (2018). They explored how PR professionals in different organisations used social media to engage with stakeholders.

We employed a single, exploratory case study design (Yin 2012), with this research not representative of all fast-food establishments or their engagements during the stricter lockdown levels in South Africa in 2020. The single case study design was primarily adopted because of the project's limited scope since using multiple fast-food companies was not immediately viable. We may, however, build on this work using several South African fast-food organisations and conduct more extensive comparative analyses.

Sampling

Purposive or “judgement sampling” was used to choose the PR practitioners interviewed, the fast-food franchise, and content posted on Facebook and Twitter (Etikan 2016). The PR practitioners were selected because the study focuses on how this department engaged with consumers, with the company chosen because of its witty, interactive engagements with stakeholders online (Igumbor et al. 2012). Furthermore, we analysed Facebook and Twitter content because the participants noted that these two platforms were primarily used for regular consumer communication. Content posted between 25 March 2020, when the company closed before the level-five lockdown and the end of July 2020, around one month after all fast-food establishments could reopen, was purposively selected.

Although the company is active on Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Tinder, none of these platforms were primarily used for engagement during the period studied. Despite researchers such as Hellemans et al. (2021) finding that younger audiences mostly used Instagram and TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic, analysing these platforms in this study would have been purposeless, considering every participant noted that Company X did not use them for symmetrical engagement. This study focuses on two-way interactions with consumers, and exclusively, platforms used by the franchise for this were purposively sampled.

Using one fast-food company as a case was challenging because the franchise has a small PR team. Therefore, snowball selection was used to sample an adequate number of people (Leighton et al. 2021) who work alongside the PR team and use social media to engage with consumers. A total of six semi-structured interviews were therefore conducted. Two interviews took place with the selected franchise’s internal PR team, with the rest of the discussions conducted with members of the internal and external digital teams working with the organisation, with one external PR practitioner sampled.

The digital and PR teams who work with the franchise share a dovetailing relationship, and their roles overlap. For this reason, sampling members of the internal and external digital teams was relevant to this project and helped us address the study’s aim. In Table 1, we categorise each participant based on how they were coded in the study, their titles, and whether they were internal or external role-players to the franchise. Participants were coded alphabetically in the order in which they were interviewed.

Table 1: Categorisation of research participants, including their titles, codes, and relationship to the selected company

Participants recruited through purposive sampling	Title	Operations
Respondent A	Public relations manager	Internal public relations department
Respondent B	General manager of brand and strategy	Internal public relations department

Participants recruited through snowball sampling	Title	Operations
Respondent C	Account manager	External digital agency partner
Respondent D	Social media manager	External digital agency partner
Respondent E	Managing partner	External public relations agency partner
Respondent F	Digital manager	Internal digital department

Data Collection

Information was gathered through interviews and social media content analysis. Six interviews were conducted via Zoom Cloud Meetings and Microsoft Teams between 22 June and 22 July 2021. We asked each respondent about social media use by the PR department, which platforms were used for consumer engagement, why specific media were used, and how much input the PR team had in online content development during the period studied. Lastly, we asked all respondents whether the PR team engaged in feedback-driven communication with consumers on social media during the hard lockdown in 2020. The interviews were helpful in earmarking which social media posts were specifically from the PR team.

Between 5 and 29 August 2021, we gathered and analysed content posted on Facebook and Twitter to identify messages sent to consumers during lockdown levels five, four, and three. Specifically, we evaluated content posted on these platforms between March and July 2020.

Each interview was recorded with the permission of the respondents, four of whom were comfortable with showing their faces on camera. Only two interviews exclusively relied on listening to the voices of participants. However, the efficacy of the study was not impacted since we could still garner information from these participants regarding social media use by Company X's PR team during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As will be discussed later, all participants signed a consent form, voluntarily participated in this research, and could withdraw from the study at any point.

Each interview was manually transcribed, with the researchers listening to each discussion and typing out each word said by participants, with filler words and redundancies removed. Although each transcription was arduous and time-consuming, methodically typing out each discussion and highlighting key points and codes helped us start the process of thematic analysis.

When collating the Twitter and Facebook posts, we took screenshots of each post published on both platforms between March and July 2020, with 23 Facebook posts and 320 tweets collected during this period. The Twitter posts included tweets and retweets, engagement or tongue-in-cheek posts, COVID-19-related tweets, tactical posts,

responses to users, and posts by influencers tagging the franchise. However, while there were 150 comments under the 23 Facebook posts tallied, they were not analysed because these interactions only included short, straightforward responses to complaints and queries by this stakeholder group. Unlike Twitter, Facebook was not used primarily for interactive engagement by consumers or the Company X team and was mainly employed for critical information-sharing during the COVID-19 health crisis.

Screenshots of each Facebook and Twitter post were saved in individual folders, organised by month, with each post including the date it was shared and the key message communicated to audiences. As will be explicated later, Facebook was mainly used for crisis communication and once-off posts about operational protocols during the three lockdown levels, with Twitter used for fun, tongue-in-cheek engagements.

Data Analysis

We analysed both datasets thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach as a guide. Methodologically triangulating data helped us establish reliability (Taherdoost 2016), and we found alignment between the interview data and social media content.

Since this work is interpretivist and exploratory, we were open to various themes that emerged in both the interviews and online posts, with the open coding principles suggested by Williams and Moser (2019) employed in this study. We were, however, critically aware that using the open coding technique would result in a broad spectrum of themes emerging (Seale 2017), with some of the data not immediately relevant to the overarching objectives of this work. Some interesting themes that were discovered can be explored by us or other scholars in future research.

We printed out each interview and social media screenshots. After reading through both datasets multiple times, we used various coloured sticky notes and pens to note down specific codes and themes that were repetitive in the interviews and the online content. Through our analysis of data, we found that there were two main categories of social media posts found on the selected franchise's Twitter and Facebook pages, which were:

- Content that had *significant* PR input.
- Content that had *some* input from the PR department.

As mentioned previously, we applied the principles of intersubjective thinking that have been extensively discussed by Van Zyl and Sabiescu (2020). Therefore, we were critical of how our world-views, experiences, and data gathering and analysis processes impacted our findings and understood that the results from this study are not generalisable and only applicable to Company X.

A Note on Ethics

All participants and the organisation's gatekeeper requested anonymity for the company and its employees. Therefore, the establishment and participants are not identified. All research participants are coded alphabetically as Respondent A, B, C, D, E, and F, with their affiliations with the organisation briefly described. Lavrakas (2008) explains the importance of research anonymity, stating that protecting participants' identities and their organisations may help respondents feel more comfortable sharing information honestly and without reluctance. All respondents willingly participated in the study and could withdraw their consent at any time, with all raw data securely saved, managed, and exclusively accessible to us. Ethical clearance was granted by the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) before this work was undertaken, and no person or organisational reputation was tainted through this work.

Findings

In our presentation of key findings, we explore the inter-reliant relationship between Company X's digital and PR teams and then examine critical factors that make these two functions dissimilar. After that, we explain how the PR team used social media and which platforms were used to engage with consumers during the hard lockdown in 2020. Lastly, we explore the critical themes derived through the thematic analysis. These themes help explain which social media posts had *significant* input from the PR team and which posts included *some* involvement from this department. The key themes that are explored later are, therefore:

- Crisis communication
- CSR communication
- Critical, one-way messaging
- Reputation management with tactical posts
- Stakeholder-inclusive engagements during lockdown
- Prevention of misinformation

Interconnected Digital and PR Roles

There is an inter-reliant connection between the PR and digital practitioners within the selected franchise. All six participants agreed that the PR and digital teams work well together. These two departments collaborated during the hard lockdown periods in 2020 to conceptualise specific messages published on the franchise's Twitter and Facebook pages. According to Respondent B, the internal general manager of brand and strategy, much of the content posted on the company's social media platforms during the lockdown in 2020 was formulated by multiple people who operate within the digital,

PR, and creative teams. They further argued that the company's internal teams and external digital, PR, and creative agencies were involved in communicating relevant messages to consumers online. This finding shares similarities with a study by Gesualdi (2019), who argues that social media has created new opportunities for collaboration and encroachment between different roles within the holistic marketing mix.

Respondent F, who manages the digital and online platforms for various Indian, African, and Middle Eastern markets within the company, noted:

We [the digital and PR teams] leaned on each other a lot, and we intercepted a lot. A lot of the work we did during lockdown last year, they amplified, and a lot of what they did, we amplified, so we definitely have a hand-in-hand relationship.

Respondent F further explained why Company X decided to use Facebook and Twitter for engagements, despite many young people using platforms such as TikTok during the pandemic:

We used the tried and tested engagement platforms that had been working for us. A pandemic and global crisis was taking place, and it was not a good time to experiment with other platforms for consumer engagement.

Similarly, Respondent C, who is an external digital practitioner managing the franchise's various online platforms, said:

During lockdown in 2020, the internal PR team and the PR agency would develop content and statements that would need to be published on social media. Once a statement was prepared, we'd get the press release from them and repurpose the statement into a news article on the company's website, and also publish it on the socials.

The above responses echo Naumovska and Blazeska's (2016) findings, which note the benefits of effective integration between different communication departments. They argue that the role of PR professionals in the marketing mix in this endeavour may aid organisational transparency. They also claim that businesses implementing effective IMC practices are far more efficient in their relationship-building efforts than those undertaking a siloed approach to organisational messaging.

Differentiating between PR and Digital Roles

Despite significant collaboration between the company's PR and digital teams, this partnership did *not* extend to regularly managing the franchise's social media pages. While the franchise's PR practitioners strategically use social media, they use these platforms ad hoc.

This was suggested by Respondent B in the following quotation:

We use social media from a public relations perspective occasionally. So, public relations is often executed in digital spaces, not always, but in some online spaces. We look for ways to use social media to drive our PR targets.

Similarly, Respondent A, who functions as the internal PR manager for the selected company, stated:

The digital team focuses on engagement and having conversations online with our consumers, fostering brand love.

All respondents suggested that during the pandemic in 2020 when pertinent communication needed to be disseminated to consumers, the PR team would craft press releases and then send them to the digital team, who would share them on social media. Therefore, the PR team did not directly work on the selected company's social media platforms. Practitioners relayed messages to the digital team, who edited and shared the information on Facebook and Twitter.

While some studies have found that practitioners use social media intermittently (Robson and James 2013), we were surprised that this was the case in the selected fast-food establishment, which integrates diverse digital platforms into its communication with stakeholders. Furthermore, Du Plessis (2018) argues that using social media for interactive dialogues during organisational crises could foster trust and mutually beneficial relationships with various stakeholders long after the crisis has passed. PR professionals are essential in authentic social media communication (Du Plessis 2018).

“Traditional” PR Practices

Respondents A and B said they engaged in “classical” PR practices, including media relations, strategic brand planning, sponsorships, paid and earned PR, and crisis communication. Furthermore, both participants noted that while social media was used to achieve specific PR targets during the pandemic, they were used as “just another medium” through which organisational messages could be shared. Respondent B, for example, said:

Social media communication from a PR perspective is usually reserved for one of two things; when something big is happening in the country and when we have something critical to tell our audiences.

Similarly, Joo and Teng (2016) suggest that while PR professionals value social media and how these platforms can help drive specific targets, many practitioners have not fully embraced its relationship and brand-building opportunities. There are no universally accepted ways practitioners (should) use these platforms (Capriotti, Zeler, and Camilleri 2021; Mavimbela et al. 2018), with many studies producing varied, non-generalisable results.

Social Media Use by the Selected Franchise

Although the selected company is active on various platforms, it only used Facebook and Twitter consistently in 2020. Respondents noted that two distinct audiences were found on these channels, with the franchise's digital team cognisant of the stakeholders' needs. Respondent B explained this well in the following quotation:

[We use] Twitter more for engagements and Facebook for broadcasting and publishing advertisements. Facebook may be for our older audiences and Twitter for younger users, but we are quite well represented across the full South African landscape.

Similarly, Respondent D, an external digital practitioner, noted:

We keep our conversations on Twitter because that is the conversation platform.

We were not surprised that Facebook was one of the company's primary engagement platforms. A study by Statista found that it was still the most-used social network globally in April 2024 (Statista 2024). Furthermore, this result corresponds with the study by Mavimbela et al. (2018), who found that both Twitter and Facebook were highly used tools for stakeholder engagement by PR practitioners.

Social Media Content with *Significant* Public Relations Input

These posts were conceptualised *directly* by the PR team during the strict lockdown periods in 2020.

Crisis Communication

After the president announced that South Africa would be placed under a level-five lockdown (South African Government 2020a), the PR team within Company X formulated press releases about the franchise closing, which were repurposed for social media. Moreover, the PR department conceptualised all communication about the global COVID-19 crisis and the franchise's operations during the different lockdown levels.

According to Respondent B, messaging from the PR team would primarily communicate serious matters. They noted this in the following quotation:

So, when we have serious things to communicate, which forms part of our crisis communication, PR would be the genesis of that work. Also, if there is anything specific to communicate, such as the COVID-19 protocols we followed to keep you safe [the PR team would be responsible for that messaging as well].

Similarly, Respondent A explained that while the company does not usually use social media for crisis communication, the pandemic was unique, where incorporating these platforms was essential. They explained this in the following quotation:

We don't normally use social media to engage in crisis communication, but obviously because we were dealing with an unprecedented pandemic, we would have, for example, briefed our infographics people and said, "do an infographic that is easy to understand where we'll quite simply illustrate that we will wear masks and we will be sanitising."

According to Civelek et al. (2016), PR professionals' strategic use of social networks during crises enables credible, authentic engagements between an organisation and its constituents. These engagements may also protect a company's reputation during organisational crises (Capriotti, Zeler, and Camilleri 2021; Claeys and Coombs 2020; Coombs 2007).

CSR Communication

During the hard lockdown, the PR team communicated key information about the outlet's CSR initiatives on Facebook and Twitter. The hunger drive and partnership with the Solidarity Fund are two pertinent examples of CSR communication posted during the period studied.

Hunger Drive

With the hunger drive, the selected company partnered with two other establishments during the hard lockdown and opened a few restaurants to deliver food to people affected by COVID-19. In the quotation below, Respondent B explains more about the initiative.

We ran a "frenemies" campaign, where [we teamed up with] two other franchises, who had the same problem as us; they would not have been able to trade, and all their food would have become expired. We didn't want the food to go to waste, so as the three frenemies, we partnered together, and we donated the food to people in need [who were] affected by COVID-19.

Partnership with the Solidarity Fund

In May 2020, Facebook and Twitter were used for information dissemination about the franchise's partnership with the Solidarity Fund, a charity formed in 2020 to support people affected by COVID-19 (Solidarity Fund, n.d.). With this campaign, the company encouraged consumers to purchase vouchers, with money worth ten times the gift card's value contributed to the Solidarity Fund. Respondent F explained the value of this campaign in the following quotation:

Working with the solidarity fund was sort of part of our values [as a company] and gave our app relevance in a time when we couldn't sell chicken.

There is a dovetailing relationship between CSR and stakeholder theory, with both concepts positing that organisations should be cognisant of the needs of diverse organisational constituents and not exclusively stockholders (Dmytriiev et al. 2021; Freeman 1984, 2010; Hörisch et al. 2020). Similarly, there is also an interconnected

relationship between public relations and CSR, including facets related to relationship building with stakeholders, reputation management, and implementing sustainable business practices (Clark 2000; Correia 2019; Reeves 2016).

Critical, One-Way Messaging

Although the franchise's digital team practised two-way symmetrical communication on social media during the hard lockdown in 2020, the PR team engaged in one-way messaging with consumers. Therefore, during the hard lockdown, these practitioners employed certain constructs related to the public information model in their engagements on Twitter and Facebook (Grunig and Hunt 1984; Suyono and Hanathasia 2014). As mentioned, this communication model proposes a form of unilateral engagement, where practitioners focus on delivering informational messages to stakeholders (Grunig and Hunt 1984).

Therefore, it is fair to state that the company practised two-way and informational communication with its consumers. Morsing and Schultz (2006) argue that while both models are valid, the former engagement form is preferred when building lasting connections with stakeholders and communicating about CSR practices.

Social Media Content with *Some* Public Relations Input

These posts illustrated substantial integration between the PR and digital departments.

Reputation Management with Tactical Posts

The selected company's "tactical" social media content encompasses witty, often satirical posts conceptualised by the creative, digital, and PR teams that address matters of interest to online audiences. These posts contain the franchise's easily recognisable fonts, artwork, and colourful backgrounds. The company often uses these posts as engagement tactics by instigating conversations about central social and political issues in South Africa. These posts have *some* PR input, with practitioners ensuring that nothing posted online would damage the franchise's reputation.

The various "lockdown lingo" posts published by the selected company during lockdown level five in April 2020 are examples of this. In these tactical posts, nomenclature related to COVID-19 and the lockdown were crafted into witty puns, with important messages communicated to consumers about the importance of social distancing, sanitising, and staying home as far as possible.

Stakeholder-Inclusive Engagements during Lockdown

All respondents suggested that social media communication was aimed at consumers and potential consumers. Respondent B explained this well in the following quotation:

[Social media communication is aimed at] everyone who is interested in the company, so we speak quite democratically. So, it's anyone who wants to know about our business.

Our company is of the people, and by the people, so, we are always communicating with our audiences. We talk to them, and they talk to us; it's a fluid relationship.

Another way the company communicates with consumers in a stakeholder-inclusive manner is by incorporating various South African languages and unique colloquialisms into their posts. This was noted by Respondent D:

One of our personas is that we are just a South African brand. So, sometimes we'll use Zulu, sometimes we'll use Tswana, sometimes we're using Afrikaans, so we try and encapsulate as many languages as possible, and I think it helps to have a diverse team.

Prevention of Misinformation

Company X also used social media to ensure that consumers always knew the franchise's status to prevent the proliferation of misinformation about the business (Staunton et al. 2020). All respondents noted that the company did so efficiently, with no significant misinformation cases occurring.

Respondent E argued that misinformation was not an issue that affected the selected company because of the brand's relationships with its consumers. They noted:

One thing the company does very well is maintain relationships. So, whenever there is any misinformation about the franchise, people will always come to me and say, "I received this, is it true?" and I'll go, "No, it isn't."

Discussion

In this article, we qualitatively explored how the PR team within a popular South African fast-food franchise used social media to engage with consumers during levels five, four, and three of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. We used stakeholder theory and the two-way model as our theoretical points of departure, with symmetrical engagement with consumers as a critical construct in this work. Using Grunig and Hunt's (1984) linkage map, we characterised consumers as functional stakeholders Company X needed to continue its operations. We drew inspiration from Camilleri (2020), who presupposed that in addition to interacting with stakeholders for crisis communication purposes, PR practitioners should engage with vital organisational constituents in an interactive way about matters that interest them to build relationships, even during emergencies.

Various researchers, such as Capriotti, Zeler, and Camilleri (2021), Niell and Lee (2016), Komodromos (2014), and Claeys and Coombs (2020) have discussed best practices regarding how PR practitioners can use social media. Niell and Lee (2016) suggested that the proliferation of these platforms has created new roles for these practitioners. Claeys and Coombs (2020) also reflected on the benefits of using these channels during organisational crises.

Robson and James (2013) found that while there are diverse ways that practitioners can use various online platforms, these communicators still employed social media on an ad hoc basis. Our study also found that PR practitioners within the selected company occasionally used social media for crisis communication, the prevention of misinformation, reputation management, and communicating Company X's CSR practices.

Through our thematic content analysis of the selected franchise's Twitter and Facebook platforms, we found an interconnected relationship between the selected company's digital and PR teams. In this way, Company X followed the best practices suggested by Naumovska and Blazeska (2016) and Kitchen and Burgmann (2010), who emphasised the importance of effective integration between various divisions in the marketing mix. However, while there is a dovetailing relationship between these two functionalities, the digital team typically uses social media to interact with consumers daily.

Respondent B said: "We talk to them [key stakeholders], and they talk to us; it's a fluid relationship." While their statement echoes the fundamental principles etched within Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model, the PR team in Company X engaged in one-way, public informational messaging. The internal and external digital teams engaged with consumers symmetrically by responding to retweets, mentions, and comments about various topics. While queries from consumers about operational protocols, complaints, and the like were responded to, there were also tongue-in-cheek, fun engagements on social media, particularly on Twitter. Fun, witty interactions are what the company is known for, and they managed to keep consumers engaged with their sassy responses and online communication throughout the pandemic.

Facebook and Twitter posts also included important information about COVID-19 and used funny nomenclature related to the pandemic in these posts. These tactical posts included input from the PR team and the digital department. While the PR team was concerned with reputation management and combatting misinformation, the digital team focused on the fun use of language in these posts. Researchers such as Cinelli et al. (2020), Barua et al. (2020), and Staunton et al. (2020) also emphasised the benefits of social media use to prevent the proliferation of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation about a company during crises.

According to all participants, Facebook and Twitter were used during the COVID-19 pandemic for regular communication with consumers. These findings are similar to those of Mavimbela et al. (2018), who explored social media use by various PR practitioners in multiple fields. However, unlike their study, this study only focused on one company in a market underexplored by PR researchers. Various other aspects of this study make it unique, including the period studied and the company analysed.

All respondents noted that Facebook was mainly used for informational purposes, with older audiences found on it, while Twitter was the channel used for engagement with

younger stakeholders. Participants' responses echoed what we found on both platforms, with 23 informational posts shared on Facebook about COVID-19 company closures, operations during various levels, tactical posts, and the CSR initiatives Company X engaged in. Conversely, Twitter remained interactive throughout the pandemic, with plenty of engagement in retweets, mentions, comments, fun threads, and responses to audiences found thereon.

Hellemans et al. (2021) found that younger audiences mainly used platforms like Instagram and TikTok during the pandemic. However, Respondent F noted that Company X used the tried and tested platforms to work for them during the hard lockdown. Respondent F further explained that the pandemic was not the most appropriate time to test out the engagement opportunities of other platforms.

The awareness shown by Company X regarding what consumers used each platform for and engaging with them appropriately on each channel is another example of the franchise's stakeholder-inclusive practices. The company was shown to care for diverse stakeholders through its CSR efforts and symmetrical engagements with consumers and potential consumers online. These constituent-inclusive practices are dubbed as fundamental, according to the core principles within stakeholder theory (Bourne 2016; D'Souza 2021; Freeman 1984, 2010) and were executed well by Company X.

In this study, we have effectively compared PR best practices regarding social media use during organisational crises with the real-world realities of a well-known company. There is a paucity of scholarship addressing PR professionals' use of social networks in fast-food businesses during crises, especially in the South African context. This study thus contributes to the advancement of additional academic debate around the use of social media by PR practitioners in the fast-food market. Specifically, this study adds to the pool of knowledge that promotes an understanding of the importance of PR professionals use of social media along with other members of the marketing mix to engage in a feedback-driven manner with stakeholders online.

Research Limitations

One of the most significant limitations of this study lies in its online anonymity. Per the ethics agreement, we needed to omit the establishment's name in this article. Anonymity ultimately limited the specificity of our descriptions and prevented us from including raw screenshots of Twitter and Facebook posts in our findings.

Additionally, using the company as a single case study was challenging. We struggled to obtain adequate *internal* PR professionals for this study, with only two practitioners functioning within the franchise. Therefore, we needed to be innovative in our data collection, using the purposive sampling method (Etikan 2016) to select the two internal PR participants, with the remaining four selected using the snowball method (Leighton

et al. 2021). However, all research aims were addressed effectively, and we simply had to adjust some of our proposed data collection methods.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, we sought to explore how the PR team in a selected fast-food company used social media to engage with consumers during different lockdown levels in South Africa in 2020. This research was approached through the lens of stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984) and the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig and Hunt 1984) and produced interesting, non-generalisable results.

Owing to the inherent interpretivist nature of this work, the qualitative approach was adopted and a case study design employed. Data were gathered through six semi-structured interviews and content analysis, with both datasets thematically evaluated. Through our collection and analysis of data, we found that the PR practitioners within the selected company only used social media on an ad hoc basis during the hard lockdown periods of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

We also found that Facebook and Twitter were the two most-used platforms by the PR team in Company X. These social media pages were managed daily by the internal and external digital teams. The PR department primarily used social media for CSR engagement and crisis communication and to protect the firm's reputation by providing critical input on tactical engagement posts during the hard lockdown. Furthermore, information was timeously disseminated online to consumers regarding organisational protocols adhered to during diverse lockdown periods to prevent the proliferation of misinformation.

The type of symmetrical engagement advocated for by Grunig and Hunt (1984), Camilleri (2021), and El Kasim (2017) was practised online by the selected franchise. However, the digital team was primarily responsible for these stakeholder-inclusive interactions. The PR department only engaged with consumers about important matters and would send press statements to the digital team, who would repurpose the information on social media. Therefore, two-way and informational communication was practised in the selected fast-food franchise during the hard lockdown, which Morsing and Schultz (2006) note is often the case in many organisations. Lastly, all respondents noted that social media communication was targeted at both consumers and potential consumers, with the company aiming to be as stakeholder-inclusive as possible in its online engagements.

Despite this study's inherent homogeneity, the research is nonetheless reliable, contributing to ongoing scholarly debate on social media use by PR professionals. Future researchers should build on this work by using multiple cases, comparing the diverse engagement techniques of various fast-food companies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In so doing, these academics and their successors would better understand how PR professionals within this market used social media to engage with consumers and *why* these practitioners chose to use these channels in a specific way. Additionally, we did not include consumers' views in this study. Therefore, if future academics decide to advance this topic using stakeholder theory, it would be interesting to have consumer input in their analyses and not exclusively sample PR practitioners.

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