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# PERCEIVED BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES REGARDING THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS ACTIVITIES

## ABSTRACT

*Social media holds important implications for the public relations profession. Researchers have identified many benefits that could be reaped when social media is used by organisations for public relations activities. However, there also are many challenges. According to Phillips' model of digital communication tools there are four variables associated with the benefits and challenges of using social media. This study investigated, by means of an online questionnaire survey, the perceptions of a randomly drawn sample of Gauteng-based public relations practitioners regarding such challenges and benefits. The results revealed that Twitter and Facebook are the most preferred social media for engaging with stakeholders. Further, it was found that when social media is used for purposes of public relations actions, public relations practitioners tend to perceive the possible social media benefits associated with the four variables to be more salient (or at least equally salient) than the possible social media challenges associated with the variables of this model.*

**Keywords:** social media; public relations; strategic communication; perception; digital communication

## INTRODUCTION

This article reports on a study conducted to determine the perceptions that public relations practitioners have regarding the benefits and challenges associated with the use of social media for public relations activities. According to Grünig (2009: 8), the use of social media has provided the opportunity for public relations to be conducted more strategically in a two-way, interactive and symmetrical manner. This despite the fact that many practitioners are still using online media in the same way as they used old media, that is, by means of one-sided asymmetrical communication. One important feature of social media is that it permits people to share content, opinions, experiences and insights (Owyang & Toll 2007: 2) in such a way that each participant in the communication process is not only a provider of information to one or more people, but also

always a potential recipient of feedback or other information from any other participant in the communication process. In other words, such sharing facilitates interactive two-way communication. Two-way communication platforms allow public relations practitioners to engage with their stakeholders (Wright & Hinson 2009: 5) and to design effective campaigns that can reach online stakeholders (Hanna *et al.* 2011: 265).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was conducted against the backdrop of the four models of public relations activities (Grünig & Hunt 1984; Grünig & Grünig 1992), namely the press agency/publicity model, the public information model, the two-way asymmetrical model, and the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. These four models describe different forms of communication that can occur between an organisation and its stakeholders. More specifically, the four models differentiate in two ways between communication activities: firstly, with regard to the intent of the communicator (i.e. to persuade or influence or to create shared understanding), and secondly, with regard to the direction of the communication (i.e. one-way, two-way asymmetrical or two-way symmetrical). As social media is usually associated with two-way symmetrical communication that can create shared understanding, the models provide public relations practitioners with useful information on how they could incorporate social media in their communication mix.

The first of the models, the press agency/publicity model, views public relations as a messaging, publicity, information and media-relations function. Using this approach, public relations practitioners may use persuasion and manipulation to influence stakeholders' behaviour (Rensburg & De Beer 2011: 155). Grünig (2009: 8) argues that, since the advent of social media, neither public relations practitioners nor journalists working in traditional media are able to control the flow of information. More specifically, Grünig (*ibid.*) observes that social media makes the control of communication largely impossible and that the assumed control of messages and influence has always been an illusion rather than a reality of public relations practice.

The second of Grünig and Hunt's (1984) models of public relations is the public information model. In this model, information is disseminated to the audience without the aim of changing attitudes. The model states that public relations practitioners first use social media as an information dump – in the same way that they use traditional media, newsletters and publications (Grünig 2009: 7). The theory further suggests that websites are used to disseminate information and to post publications and news releases. Social media like Facebook and YouTube fit in the public information model.

According to Phillips (2009: 6), social media has dialogical, interactive and relational properties that are suited for public relations activities. It could be expected that this approach would force public relations practitioners to abandon their traditional one-way communication, message-oriented and asymmetrical communication. However, history shows that even with the introduction of online media, public relations practitioners still tend to use social media in largely the same way that they previously used traditional media. In the third model, the two-way asymmetric model,

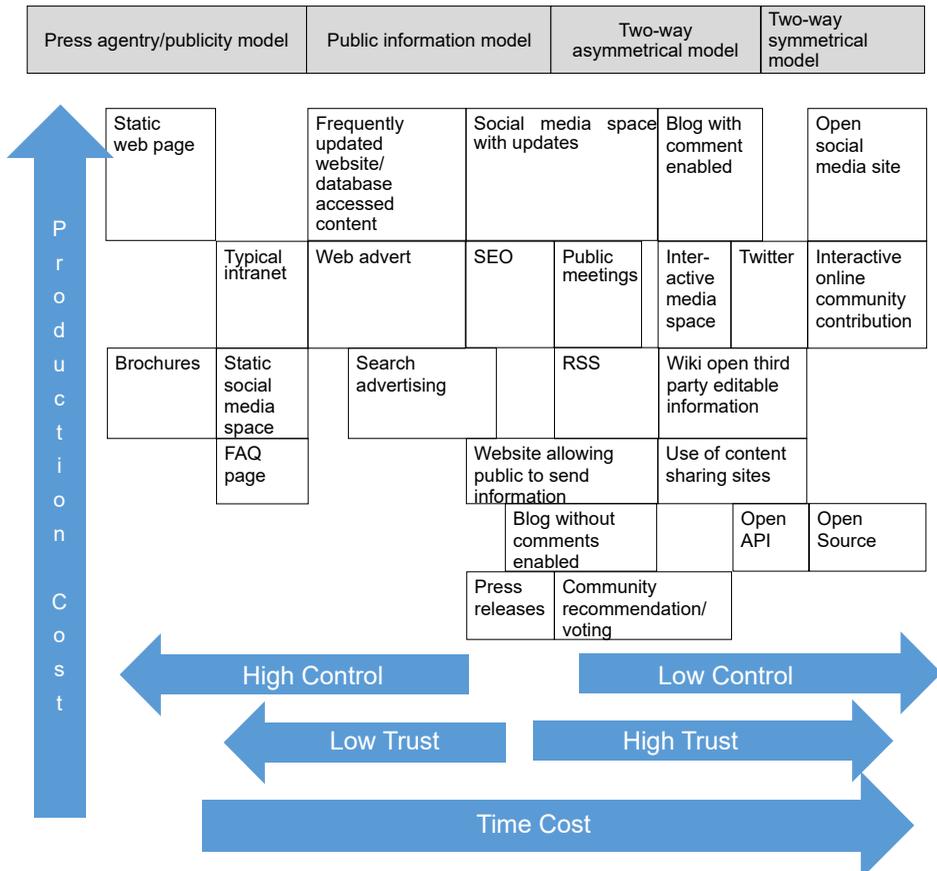
practitioners use persuasion and manipulation to influence audiences to behave as the organisation desires. Although this process does involve feedback and research on how stakeholders feel about the organisation (Waddington 2012: 2), this is not done with the intention of adapting organisational behaviour (Turney 1998: 1). In this model the organisational communicator's intention is rather to make the organisation's own message more persuasive. According to Phillips (2009: 6), organisations mostly practice the asymmetric model of two-way communication to manipulate stakeholders' cognitions, attitudes or behaviour.

The fourth model, which is especially applicable to the current study, is the two-way symmetrical model. This model "emphasizes communication exchange, reciprocity, and mutual understanding" (Grünig & Grünig 1992: 8). When using social media, there is always the possibility for recipients of posts/messages to reply or make comments, which results in a two-way exchange of information that can lead to a higher level of mutual understanding. Grünig (2009: 1) therefore argues that because of these interactions between communication participants and the resulting likely improvement of mutual understanding, social media makes it more feasible than before to achieve organisations' goals of high quality and long-term relationships. The difference between the two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical model lies in that communicators' intent when using the two-way asymmetrical model is mainly to manipulate, persuade or influence, and although feedback (i.e. two-way communication) is required, it is not with the intention of achieving shared understanding.

While Waddington (2013: 6) argues that social media enables organisations to create information that would spread extensively and quickly, there is also a downside. This is that organisations have little control over the discussion of their products or services, as it is contributed by their stakeholders. When using social media, stakeholders automatically engage in the conversation; they can freely share information about the organisation, which makes the communication process difficult to control.

Of particular relevance for this investigation is Phillips' (2009: 1) model of digital communication tools, which was developed to show which digital communication tools can typically be used in the above-mentioned four major public relations models (see Figure 1).

Phillips' (2009) model of digital communication tools for different public relations models includes four variables (represented by arrows in Figure 1) that could have an effect, depending on the model and the PR activities. This study focused largely on the challenges and benefits (as discussed below) that can be perceived to be associated with each of these four variables:



**FIGURE 1: PHILLIPS' MODEL OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION TOOLS**  
(ADAPTED FROM PHILLIPS 2009)

The first of the four variables in the model is Time Cost. According to Figure 1, PR activities represented on the right-hand side of the figure (i.e. the two-way symmetrical model) are expected to require more time than those on the left-hand side (i.e. the press agency/publicity or public information models). From this, it can be concluded that for practitioners wishing to use social media in their PR activities, time is a challenge that needs to be recognised and managed. On the other hand, from the viewpoint of external stakeholders, the instant nature of communication via social media could be seen as constituting a benefit.

The second variable depicted in the model is the Level of Control. According to Figure 1, PR activities situated on the right-hand side of the figure (e.g. the two-way symmetrical model) are expected to take place with management having less control over the communication content and proceedings than would be the case with PR activities depicted on the left-hand side (i.e. the press agency/publicity or public information models). From this, it may be concluded that for practitioners involving social media in

their PR activities there is a challenge, namely lack of control. This could lead to further problems, such as media abuse by individual employees. These are challenges that need to be recognised and managed. Contrastingly, from the viewpoint of the external stakeholders, the accompanying transparency of communication could lead to a better corporate reputation, which could be perceived as a benefit.

The third variable shown in the model is the Level of Trust. According to Figure 1, PR activities represented on the right-hand side of the figure (i.e. the two-way symmetrical model) are expected to require more trust than those on the left-hand side (i.e. the press agency/publicity or public information models). For example, when corporate information is provided to stakeholders via social media, this necessarily involves a loss of privacy, and the PR practitioners have to be trusted not to provide incorrect information or information that could be detrimental to the organisation's image. This is a challenge that needs to be recognised and managed in the organisation. However, from the viewpoint of external stakeholders, useful and honest communication in the two-way symmetrical model could be seen as a benefit in that it could be a tool to manage and build stakeholder relationships and to also enhance an organisation's corporate image.

The fourth variable is Production Cost. Some of the communication tools portrayed in Figure 1 are not cheap, especially those providing two-way communication. High cost could therefore be seen as a challenge. It is, however, also possible that if the use of these tools lead to beneficial outcomes, using social tools may be viewed as being cost-effective.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

It is clear from the preceding discussion that there are certain challenges and benefits that can be associated with the use of social media for purposes of corporate communication with stakeholders. In line with this discussion, the following research objectives were set:

- ◆ To investigate the perceptions of PR practitioners in Gauteng regarding the challenges they face when using social media for PR activities;
- ◆ To investigate the perceptions of PR practitioners in Gauteng regarding the benefits they gain when using social media for public relations activities;
- ◆ To investigate if the challenges associated with the use of social media for PR activities are perceived by practitioners to be more salient or less salient than the benefits.

In order to achieve these objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

- ◆ Research question 1: What are the perceptions of PR practitioners in Gauteng about the challenges they face when using social media for PR activities?
- ◆ Research question 2: What are the perceptions of PR practitioners in Gauteng about the benefits that could be associated with using social media for PR activities?

- ◆ Research question 3: Are the challenges associated with the use of social media for PR activities perceived by practitioners to be more salient or less salient than the benefits?

The above research questions were addressed by examining specific challenges and benefits that, according to the literature, especially Phillips' (2009) digital communication model, could be associated with using social media as a corporate communication platform.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study made use of a cross-sectional research design (Henning 2004: 25) that followed a largely quantitative research approach. Quantitative data was obtained from close-ended questions in a questionnaire survey, and were analysed using SPSS. A descriptive approach (Bellamy 2012: 308; Fox & Bayat 2007: 45) was used to investigate the perceptions that a sample of Gauteng-based PR practitioners have regarding possible challenges and benefits that they perceived to be associated with the use of social media as a corporate communication platform. For each of the various perceived challenges and benefits, a five-point Likert scale was used to record the extent to which the respondents agreed that each item could be a challenge or benefit. The five response options available to the respondents were "1 = Completely disagree"; "2 = Disagree"; "3 = Neutral or Unsure"; "4 = Agree" and "5 = Completely agree". In addition, the respondents were asked an open-ended question to describe the reason behind their choices.

### Sampling

The sample of respondents was obtained by using random sampling to invite, via email, Gauteng-based members of the Public Relations Institute of South Africa (PRISA) to participate in the research. Due to a high level of non-responses, this process had to be continued until the entire sampling frame had been approached, which means that, strictly speaking, this approach could also be described as an attempted census of all members of the accessible target population. The study's sampling procedure did, however, exhibit one important advantage associated with probability sampling, namely that all members of the accessible target population had an equal chance of being selected to participate in the study. On the other hand, the fact that the study was limited to only Gauteng-based practitioners, limits the generalisability of the findings.

The realised sample of this study consisted of 48 Gauteng-based members affiliated with PRISA and who had actively been using social media for PR activities for at least a year prior to when the study was conducted. A survey questionnaire was used to collect the data. The respondents were first contacted via email in order to obtain their consent to participate in the study, and the questionnaire was accessed electronically by the respondents via the online survey software Survey Monkey™.

## Reliability

The reliability of the study's findings was investigated by calculating Cronbach alpha scores (Ritter 2010: 5; Brown 2002: 17) for the scales used to measure the respondents' perceptions of the challenges and benefits involved in using social media for purposes of public relations. A Cronbach alpha score of 0.7 is considered to be a minimum requirement for reliable quantitative data, and in cases with less than 10 items, even lower scores can be indicative of a satisfactory internal reliability (Pallant 2013: 87). In this study a Cronbach alpha score of 0.824 was obtained for the 5-point Likert scale items representing perceived challenges of using social media for PR activities. A Cronbach alpha score of 0.886 was obtained for the 5-point Likert scale items representing perceived benefits of using social media for PR activities. From this it can be concluded that the data obtained from these two sets of scale items had good internal consistency and reliability.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Perceived challenges to using social media for corporate communication

Table 1 contains four mean challenge scores, where each score indicates the respondents' level of agreement that an issue is a challenge to using social media for PR activities, as well as the confidence intervals (on a 95% probability level) that were statistically calculated for these four mean scores. The table also provides more detailed information about the percentages of respondents who chose the various response options.

#### *Mean scores and confidence intervals for items representing challenges*

Four issues were mentioned in the questionnaire as possible challenges to using social media for building relationships with the stakeholders, namely media abuse (including issues, ethics and anonymity), privacy (e.g. the risk of private information being accessed), time consumption, and possible damage to the corporate image (including rumours, assumptions and stories resulting from using or not using social media).

From Table 1 it is evident that the highest mean challenge score is with regard to the challenge of damage to corporate image. This means that this was the issue that most of the respondents perceived as constituting a challenge. However, the confidence interval calculated for this mean score overlaps with the confidence intervals calculated for all three other mean scores. In fact, all four confidence intervals overlap with each other. This means that, in statistical terms, these mean scores do not differ statistically (on a 95% level of probability) from each other. In other words, statistically all four issues were perceived in more or less equal measure as constituting challenges to using social media for PR activities.

**TABLE 1: AGREEMENT/DISAGREEMENT THAT SPECIFIC ISSUES ARE CHALLENGES OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA**

Issue	Agreement/disagreement that an issue is a challenge			Mean challenge score	Standard error of mean	Confidence interval * (lower & upper limit)
	Disagree + Disagree completely	Unsure	Agree + Agree completely			
Media abuse	14.6%	20.8%	48.0%	3.55	0.1752	3.21 3.89
Privacy	27.1%	18.8%	43.8%	3.326	0.1814	2.97 3.68
Time consumption	31.2%	13.6%	48.0%	3.295	0.1966	2.91 3.68
Damage to corporate image	12.5%	16.7%	62.0%	3.795	0.1579	3.49 4.10

\* 95% confidence interval

In terms of perceptions of media abuse as a challenge, it can be deduced from the percentages in Table 1 that most of the respondents (48%) either agreed or agreed completely that media abuse is a challenge. From the open-ended responses it can be deduced that the respondents felt that with the use of social media there is always a possibility of user-generated content being abused, resulting in people becoming victims of social media and causing them to end up discussing issues with strangers.

In terms of perceptions of privacy problems as a challenge, it was found that 43.8% of the respondents agreed/agreed completely that privacy issues constitute a challenge. One respondent, who agreed strongly with this statement, qualified this view by stating that, “[h]ackers can Photoshop pictures and distort information, thus damaging the brand name. Terrorists and thieves can steal information and impersonate people (deformation of characters), as well as money laundering and strategies; and they can communicate on unregulated platforms” (sic).

Regarding perceptions of time consumption as a challenge, it was determined that almost half (48.0%) of the respondents agreed (or agreed completely) that time consumption is a challenge. A typical reason for disagreeing with the statement was that if a dedicated person was employed to do the PR work, time consumption would not be a problem. However, for those who strongly agreed that time consumption is a challenge, a typical reason was a statement such as, “[m]anaging social media eats up a lot of time; as one needs to be responsive for two-way communication to happen. Analysing platforms and reports to weed out hackers/offenders needs technology-savvy people to manage it effectively.”

In terms of perceptions of possible damage to the corporate image being a challenge, the percentages in Table 1 indicate that 62.5% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that possible damage to the corporate image is a challenge. From the open-

ended responses it may be deduced that a great deal of emphasis was placed on good management and planning that are needed to avoid damage to the corporate image.

## Perceived benefits of using social media for corporate communication

Table 2 lists seven mean benefit scores (each representing the respondents' level of agreement that an issue is a benefit arising from using social media for PR activities) as well as the confidence intervals (on a 95% probability level) that were calculated for these four mean scores. The table also provides more detailed information on the percentages of respondents who chose the various response options.

**TABLE 2: AGREEMENT/DISAGREEMENT THAT SPECIFIC ISSUES ARE BENEFITS OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA**

Issue	Agreement/disagreement that an issue is a benefit			Mean benefit score	Standard error of mean	Confidence interval* (lower limit & upper limit)
	Disagree + Disagree completely	Unsure	Agree + Agree completely			
Low cost	13.5%	8.3%	62.5%	4.28	0.136	4.01 4.55
Instant communication	13.5%	14.0%	60.4%	4.29	0.127	4.04 4.54
Transparency	4.2%	18.8%	50.0%	3.94	0.142	3.66 4.22
Stakeholder relations	4.2%	18.8%	50.1%	4.0	0.148	3.71 4.29
Measuring outputs	23.2%	12.5%	56.2%	4.11	0.141	3.83 4.39
Spreading messages	6.3%	16.7%	52.1%	4.0	0.154	3.70 4.30
Managing reputation	12.5%	10.4%	60.4%	3.77	0.196	3.39 4.15

\* 95% confidence interval

From Table 2 it is evident that the highest mean score representing benefits perceived to be possibly associated with using social media for corporate communication with stakeholders was found with regard to both the transparency and the low cost of social media. However, Table 2 shows that the confidence intervals calculated for these mean scores overlap with the confidence intervals calculated for the three other mean scores. This means that, in statistical terms, none of the mean scores differ statistically (on a 95% level of probability) from each other. In other words, all seven issues were perceived in more or less equal measure as constituting benefits to using social media for public relations activities.

Regarding perceptions about the low cost of social media benefitting the use of social media for PR, Table 2 indicates that a majority (62.5%) agreed/completely agreed that social media provides for a low cost platform for corporate communication. Respondents typically motivated their responses in the following terms: "Cost effective" and "Costs less than TV and Radio" (sic). Thus, it can be concluded that social media is seen as a relatively inexpensive and cost-effective way to reach a large number of stakeholders.

In terms of perceptions about the instantaneous nature of online communication, it was found that the majority (60.4%) agreed/completely agreed that social media can be seen as a platform that offers a useful opportunity to communicate instantly with one's stakeholders. This supports the statement of Matthews (2010: 18) that social media offers an opportunity for direct and instant corporate communication. One respondent explained that if there were active participants on social media, grievances would immediately be known, which would improve transparency and contribute to the knowledge of target audiences. Overall, the respondents considered social media as being fast and immediate and as such beneficial to building relationships with stakeholders.

With regard to perceptions about the transparency of social media in conversation, it was found that 50% of the respondents agreed/completely agreed that transparency was a benefit. Among the reasons provided for agreeing were that "the information is easily accessible" and "I agree if the organisation's communication is always transparent, honest and trustworthy".

Half (50.1%) of the respondents agreed/completely agreed that social media is suitable for managing and building relationships with stakeholders. The respondents motivated this viewpoint by means of statements about the "two-way nature" of communication via social media, which was contrasted to communication via traditional media where feedback is either not possible or at least difficult to monitor. It was also pointed out by the respondents that social media is "easy to access" as messages can be "delivered to your phone" and to "larger audiences", including "stakeholders who have limited resources".

The majority (56.2%) of the respondents concurred that the possibility of measuring social media outputs is beneficial for corporate communication. Motivations for this viewpoint included comments such as: "Absolutely! It allows organisations to do a dipstick audit instantaneously of how it is being perceived by its stakeholders."

Most of the respondents (52.1%) also agreed/agreed completely with the statement that social media is beneficial for spreading messages to stakeholders. Among the reasons provided for this view were statements such as: "It falls within the sphere of mass communication", "The reach is amazing", "Large groups/communities can be generated and reached with one message", "Yes; it is suitable; as every single stakeholder has a cell phone", and "Most of the stakeholders are using social media". In agreement with the above motivation by respondents, Drury (2008: 274) maintains that organisations who are not using social media are missing an opportunity to manage conversations taking place online.

Finally, the results indicate that almost two-thirds (60.4%) of the total sample of respondents agreed/completely agreed that social media is suitable for managing corporate reputation. Looking at the qualitative data, it was found that a great deal of

emphasis was placed on the importance of giving honest feedback to stakeholders who engage with organisations. This is necessary to avoid damage to the corporate image, for example: “if carefully controlled and managed” and “again: I concur with this statement provided managing reputation doesn’t mean to defend the defenceless organisation, changing the apparent truth into lies, engaging and listening to people”.

## Conclusions regarding the salience of perceived challenges and benefits

As mentioned previously, for each of the four variables in Phillips’ (2009) digital communication model there are several issues that can be perceived as either challenges or benefits associated with using social media for PR activities. This section addresses Research Question 3 by formulating conclusions for each of these four variables in terms of the relative salience of these competing challenges and benefits. It is clear that the respondents tended to view the possible benefits of using social media as generally being more salient than the possible challenges, from which it can be concluded that the respondents tended to favour the two-way symmetrical model for their PR activities.

The first of the four variables investigated was Time Cost, which can be associated with the potential challenge of time consumption, as well as with the potential benefit of the instant nature of communication via social media. The percentages in Table 1 and Table 2 show that although time consumption was perceived by a large proportion of the participating practitioners as a challenge that they need to recognise and manage, an even larger proportion of respondents perceived the instant nature of communication via social media as a benefit. Also, the mean benefit score for instant communication was found to be significantly higher than the mean challenge score for time consumption (as deduced from the fact that the confidence intervals of the two means do not overlap). From this it can be concluded that the benefit associated with this variable was perceived by the participating practitioners as being significantly more salient than the challenge associated with this variable.

The second variable that was investigated was the Level of Control. It was postulated that PR activities conducted within the two-way symmetrical model were likely to result in management and practitioners having less control over the communication content (as compared to PR activities in the propaganda or information models). This loss of control can be perceived as leading either to the challenge of media abuse by individuals, or to the benefit of transparency of communication. The percentages in Tables 1 and 2 indicate that the proportion of respondents who perceived media abuse to be a challenge was similar to the proportion of respondents who perceived the transparency of communication to be a benefit of social media. In addition, the mean benefit score for transparency was not found to be significantly higher than the mean challenge score for media abuse (as deduced from the lack of overlap of the confidence intervals of the two mean scores). It can therefore be concluded that the challenge and benefit associated with this variable were perceived to be more or less equally salient.

Regarding the Level of Trust variable, it was found that the majority of the participating practitioners agreed that possible damage to corporate reputation was a challenge

associated with using social media. On the other hand, most respondents also perceived social media to be associated with three benefits, namely managing corporate reputation, building relationships with stakeholders, and spreading messages to stakeholders. Although the mean challenge score and the three benefit scores of these issues were not significantly different (because the confidence intervals of the means did not overlap) it can nevertheless be concluded that the practitioners perceived more benefits than challenges with regard to this variable.

With regard to the last of the four variables, namely Production Cost, it was found that almost two-thirds of the participating practitioners perceived the cost of social media to be a benefit rather than a challenge.

The overall conclusion that can be drawn for the results of this study is that, when social media is used for the purpose of PR activities, practitioners tend to perceive the possible benefits associated with the four variables contained in Phillips' (2009) digital communication model to be more salient (or at least equally salient) than the possible challenges also associated with the variables of this model.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In terms of the challenges of using social media for PR activities, the following recommendations are made:

Regarding the issue of media abuse (including issues of ethics and anonymity), it is recommended that PRISA/organisations develop policies to guide their PR practitioners, social media specialists and communicators on the ethics of using social media to help protect both the organisation and the stakeholders.

When it comes to privacy (e.g. the risk of private information being accessed), it is recommended that PR practitioners should know the boundaries of what to post and what not to post. Organisations also need to understand that they should not disclose private information that would destroy their relationship with their stakeholders.

On the issue of possible damage to corporate image (including rumours, assumptions and stories resulting from using or not using social media), organisations are advised to respond to negative feedback in a timely manner. If this is done well, it can help prevent negative messages from going viral, and it may reduce potential damage to corporate reputation.

On the issue of time consumption, organisations are advised to have a designated person/team who deals solely with social media.

With regard to the potential benefits inherent in the use of social media for PR activities, the following recommendations are made:

Organisations should capitalise on the cost-effectiveness and instantaneous nature of these platforms in order to help them communicate with large audiences in a relatively cheap and fast manner. It is recommended that organisations do so without abusing the freedoms and opportunities provided by social media and that organisations should also utilise traditional media for enhancement.

It is recommended that organisations engage in transparent conversations via social media, and that, for purposes of managing and building relationships with stakeholders, organisations respond timely and honestly to any questions posed or issues raised on social media.

With regard to measuring social media output, it is noted that the reach of a PR campaign or programme is not only measured by the number of press clippings achieved, but can also be measured by the number of blog posts, conversations, comments, re-tweets, bookmarks, etc. that the campaign generates online (Matthews 2010: 22). Therefore, it is recommended that practitioners constantly measure their social media input in order to measure and manage benefits. Meyer (2015: 1) suggests that measuring the actual costs involved against the effectiveness of social media is vital when monitoring social media.

In order to spread messages to a large number of stakeholders, it is recommended that organisations incorporate social media platform/s that would help them to reach a larger number of stakeholders.

Finally, stakeholders should be encouraged to respond via social media to the organisation's posts or tweets, and to participate in a dialogue with the organisation to make known their views and needs. This would be in line with the research of Gill (2008: 6), who found that social media has given rise to a new style of communication that is characterised by conversation and community. It is important for PR practitioners to understand these new communication platforms in order to effectively utilise social media as a means to engage with stakeholders (Gordon 2010: 2).

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