

Dr Lucinda Bella-May
Sutton

School of Communication,
North-West University,
Potchefstroom,
South Africa
Email: Lucinda.Sutton@
nwu.ac.za (corresponding
author)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8134-3141>

Dr Louise Bezuidenhout

School of Communication,
North-West University,
Potchefstroom,
South Africa
Email: Louise.

Bezuidenhout@nwu.ac.za
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2554-9297>

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RETHINKING COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES TO FOSTER INTERNAL COMMUNITIES: A SOUTH AFRICAN RETIREMENT VILLAGE CASE STUDY

ABSTRACT

Rethinking internal communication from a community perspective has been advocated, but little is available on the communication principles underpinning internal community-building. This qualitative case study of a South African retirement village, where semi-structured interviews with management, as well as focus groups with residents were used to collect data, enabled the inductive identification of four communication principles that foster internal communities within this non-traditional internal context: participation and collaboration; shared values (both of which were previously identified in the building of communities); inclusivity and a sense of belonging; and transparency and ethical communication (of which neither was previously linked to internal community-building). These four principles align with the two-way symmetrical communication worldview and the African philosophy of ubuntu; their identification extends the public relations body of knowledge on community building through internal communication in the South African context.

Keywords: communication principles, internal communication, internal communities, retirement village, two-way symmetrical communication, ubuntu, participatory culture

INTRODUCTION

Internal communication is acknowledged as a critical function of corporate communication and public relations (Lee & Yue, 2020; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2024). Effective internal communication serves as a catalyst for organisations to achieve their vision, mission and goals, and is key to the organisation's survival (Grunig *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, an organisation's internal stakeholders are strategically crucial (Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2021) as they directly affect organisational success (Kim, 2021). However, the dominant management view of internal communication has tended to approach internal stakeholders homogeneously, rather

than as a group within which perceptions and experiences vary (Ruppel *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, another approach to managing internal communication and internal stakeholders should be considered.

Shen and Jiang (2019), Shen and Jiang (2021), and Shen and Kresic (2022) argue that scholars and practitioners should shift from an organisation-public approach, which focuses on managing and influencing stakeholders, to a community approach. Internal stakeholders, seen as a community rather than a public (or a strategic stakeholder), would be more likely to collaborate towards common goals and shared values (Shen & Jiang, 2019; Shen & Jiang, 2021; Shen & Kresic, 2022). Other authors also emphasise collaboration by elaborating on the importance of dialogue and participation in building communities (e.g. Hallahan, 2004; Hou & Macnamara, 2017; Sollis, 2023; Sommerfeldt, 2013). Valentini *et al.* (2012) and Kent *et al.* (2016) point out that the community-building approach in the internal environment is better than managing and influencing employees, considering that dialogue and participation can occur between members of the community, which include the organisation and their internal stakeholders on the same level.

Even though collaboration, dialogue and participation, which were named as communication principles by scholars focusing on a community-building perspective, are also part of traditional internal management practice, we argue that these principles (and others identified in this inductive study) should be encouraged with members' well-being and the greater good of the community in mind.

The few prior studies advocating for an internal community-building approach mostly use the traditional organisational structure in their research and arguments (Shen & Jiang, 2019; Shen & Jiang, 2021; Shen & Kresic, 2022). Furthermore, the majority of internal public relations research examines employees as internal stakeholders. Our study, however, selected a retirement village in South Africa as a case study with a unique context, rather than the traditional organisation and internal stakeholder structure where internal communication usually takes place between management and employees. The retirement village represents a traditional for-profit organisation in terms of its core business, which is to accommodate and look after elderly people and their needs. However, uniquely to the retirement village, it also represents a community. The village has a strong focus on community building towards the well-being of the elderly, which is also part of their core business. Therefore, the case study (that we refer to as a non-traditional organisation) provides a bridge for exploring internal communication in terms of rethinking what is known in the field of public relations and communication management by specifically drawing on the community orientation of the retirement village for internal communication.

Context of the South African retirement village case study

Many internal communication studies in Africa show an overreliance on Western philosophies and theories (Anani-Bossman & Bruce, 2021; Lee & Yue, 2020; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2024), which is not always applicable to or workable in the South African internal environment (Sutton *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, Sutton (2023) called for more internal communication research in the South African context to reflect this

environment. Furthermore, Lee and Yue (2020) observe that case studies are not frequently used in internal communication research. Our chosen case study of a non-traditional internal organisation responds to the lack of case study research, and it was deliberately chosen to contribute to the internal communication literature in the South African context.

The retirement village is located in South Africa's Limpopo province. Its internal stakeholders, who formed part of this study, are the residents and management. Given the context, the residents cannot necessarily be seen only as part of an organisation; rather, they primarily form part of a community. The residents are not employed by the organisation, nor do they have specific obligations towards an employer. Yet, they are the reason for the existence of the village as well as shareholders in it, and internal communication with the residents and among them has a determining influence on the achievement of the village's mission, which prioritises the needs and welfare of these residents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From internal stakeholders to internal communities

The most frequently used definition of "stakeholder" is provided by Freeman (1984: 46): "Any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives". This means that stakeholders have an interest or ownership in the organisation and can influence its future.

In an internal organisational setting, internal stakeholders have historically been seen as employees at all hierarchical levels (Clarkson, 1995; Welch & Jackson, 2007). For Tkalac Verčič *et al.* (2012) and Kang and Sung (2017), internal stakeholders are those who the organisation considers to be strategically important and who are therefore strategically managed at all levels within the organisation. Similarly, Grunig *et al.* (2002) and Kim and Rhee (2011) refer to internal stakeholders as strategic constituents. The focus on internal stakeholders in the above definitions relates to strategically managing and influencing them through internal communication.

Further recommendations concern enlarging the borders of what is meant by internal stakeholders, such as Frank and Brownell (1989), who indicate that everyone in the organisation should be considered for inclusion, and Scholes (1997), who proposes including everyone with a stake in the organisation. The variety revealed in the literature shows that there is room for various constituencies to be included within internal stakeholder boundaries, which corresponds with the idea of internal communities that looks through a broader lens at who is included.

A community has been referred to as a collective of people and institutions that freely share and bond over similar experiences, aims, interests, identities, and conventions (Hallahan, 2004; Shen & Jiang 2021). These areas held in common can also be relevant in the internal setting of an organisation when one takes the definitions for internal stakeholders into consideration. A couple of decades ago, Heller (1989) and Clark (2002) argued that the workplace should be seen as a community where workers create connections and find meaning, and that the sense of community

serves as a crucial variable. This view is echoed in subsequent work by scholars who argue that organisations should be seen as communities and that the workplace should be redesigned as a place for cooperation and collaboration toward the well-being of these internal communities, rather than influencing and managing these contingencies (Al-Omouh *et al.*, 2021; Shen & Jiang, 2021). This emphasis proposes that an organisation and its members can be seen as an internal community.

Internal communication depends on factors such as the type of industry, the structure of the organisation, organisational culture, and management styles (Quirke, 2000). Studying it from an internal community perspective can yield insights into new ways of thinking and applying internal communication for the members' well-being. The structure and goals of the retirement village we use to examine internal community-building principles argue that fostering internal communities as opposed to managing internal stakeholders is more relevant to reach cooperation and collaboration. We define communication principles as propositions that should be present to ensure that communication processes are effective in building internal communities. For these reasons, this study of internal communication within a non-traditional context becomes applicable to the internal community approach advocated for in this study and contributes to the lack of research in this area.

Building internal communities

The concept of building communities originated in development communication literature. The principles of participation and dialogue needed to build communities were conceptualised within the participatory approach (see Melkote, 1991; Rahim 1994; Servaes, 1989). This approach aims to empower and transform communities through dialogical communication as a continuous and reflective process (Otto & Fourie, 2017) through which communities are active participants in the transformation of their societies (Bezuidenhout & Kloppers, 2023).

The concept of communities was later also addressed in public relations literature. For example, Etzioni (1993) wrote of the essence of a community as one in which its members genuinely care for each other. Starck and Kruckeberg (2001) and Sommerfeldt (2013) stated that the development of communities should be at the forefront of public relations theory and practice. They argued that, through public relations, a sense of community ought to be fostered where members engage in similar activities and communal responsibilities. These studies explained the characteristics through which communities could be identified but did not elaborate on the communication principles that should be utilised to build such communities.

Hallahan (2004) and Sommerfeldt (2013) saw participation as a determining communication factor in the development of a community and advocated for the use of participation to engage its members as a way of fostering a sense of community. Hou and Macnamara (2017) elaborated on how participation should be used to engage community members as active participants in the co-creation of communication, instead of being passive spectators. Kent *et al.* (2016) identified dialogue as facilitating the goal of building communities for societal good, and as the foundation of relationships, which gives structure to communities. More recently, Sollis (2023) identified both dialogue and participation as important factors in the well-being of communities.

Other ways have been suggested to develop internal communities. Shen and Jiang (2021: 415, 420) introduced seven tenets of internal public relations from the community perspective: (1) “communitarianism is the philosophical foundation”; (2) “internal communities are created and dissolved by voluntary individuals or organisations with shared experiences, interests, identities and norms”; (3) “the importance of solidarity”; (4) “members’ individual agency, commitment to agreed-upon rules and core communal values, and balancing individual rights and common good”; (5) “relationships in and across internal communities are formed and dissolved by members voluntarily”; (6) internal public relations practitioners “play a pivotal role in facilitating community dialogue and cultivating community relationships”; and (7) “the community perspective is conducive to solving global social issues and enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion.” Shen and Jiang (2019), Shen and Jiang (2021), and Shen and Kresi (2022) argue that using these tenets to develop internal communities is a better alternative approach than internal stakeholder management used to influence stakeholders for organisational effectiveness in the field of public relations.

Previous studies explored communication principles for community-building from a public relations perspective in the external environment (such as websites and online platforms as spaces to build communities) (e.g. Hou & Macnamara, 2017; Kent *et al.*, 2016; Sollis, 2023) and Shen and Jiang (2021) investigated tenets for internal communities, but these studies do not necessarily represent South African perspectives on internal communities. They also do not specify what communication principles help to build internal communities or how to modify their application to suit local contexts. It is also unclear whether the Western perspective is relevant to internal environments such as our non-traditional case study (representing both an organisation in terms of its core business and a community) for building internal communities.

Considering the call to “rethink internal communication from a community perspective” (Shen & Jiang, 2021: 423), our study was guided by the following research question: What communication principles can be inductively drawn from members of internal communities within a non-traditional internal environment to build the community?

METHOD

We selected a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis that seeks to understand and describe people’s perceptions, opinions, and behaviour within a specific social context (see Babbie & Mouton, 2001). For the social context, we used a single case study, that is, an in-depth analysis of a particular unit relevant to the research (Gustafsson, 2017). The retirement village as a non-traditional organisation with a strong focus on community building as part of its core business, as opposed to the usual traditional organisation, made it appropriate for this research. Furthermore, the single case study qualitative approach provided the opportunity to gain insight into what communication principles are identified by the researchers to build an internal community in a non-traditional internal environment.

Semi-structured interviews with the executive manager and management committee members as well as focus groups with residents were used to collect data from different internal community members’ perspectives. The interviews and focus

groups took place in person at the retirement village. All participants were informed in advance about the purpose of the research. Their participation was voluntary, and they signed informed consent forms to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. In reporting the findings, anonymity was ensured by protecting the identities of the participants and the retirement village.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the management team of the retirement village (the executive manager and management committee) because they are responsible for the operationalisation of the village's vision, mission, and goals. A total of six interviews took place. The first interview was conducted with the executive manager, who was purposively selected (see Patton, 2015). Invitations to participate in the interviews had been e-mailed to all 11 members of the management committee, of whom five members made themselves available.

Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted to determine the residents' perceptions. Because some residents were no longer responsible for their own well-being due to vulnerability or poor health, we asked the management committee for guidance as to who could be included in the sample. All residents who qualified for inclusion were informed in advance about the research through the internal communication channels of the village (notice boards, newsletters, and WhatsApp messages) and were invited to participate in the focus groups. Different dates and times were scheduled for the focus groups and participants could select a day and time that suited them best (see convenience sampling – Du Plooy, 2009). A total of six focus groups were held with residents, with between six and 11 participants in a group; a total of 50 residents took part in the focus groups.

Data analysis

The interviews were guided by an interview schedule and the focus groups were directed by a moderator's guide. As we were following an inductive approach (Babbie & Mouton, 2001), the questions aimed to identify possible communication principles that the participants deemed important for developing internal communities in their context. Each interview and focus group lasted between 50 and 60 minutes. The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. We analysed the transcripts separately using qualitative content analysis, from which themes were derived. The themes were constructed through constant comparison of the principles that were identified; these were then reduced to the principles that occurred most often by clustering similar principles together in overarching themes (see Boeije, 2002). These overarching themes were the communication principles we identified from the case study and present as the communication principles needed in the specific context to build internal communities. We discussed our interpretation of the findings with each other and compared the identified themes to improve the validity of our qualitative approach (Wolcott, 2001).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the interviews and focus groups we identified communication themes that the participants deemed significant in their internal community environment, and which formed four overarching principles: inclusivity and a sense of belonging; participation and collaboration; shared values; and transparency and ethical communication. Through our inductive analysis, it became evident that these four principles align with the two-way symmetrical communication worldview and the African philosophy of ubuntu, which are discussed throughout this section.

The participants mostly identified the same principles, and therefore their perceptions are presented together. Distinctions between the groups of participants are made where their views differ from each other.

Inclusivity and a sense of belonging

The first theme is inclusivity, which draws on the features of creating a sense of belonging. The managers explained the unique context of the retirement village, which includes residents who are debilitated due to age, have weakened bodies, or suffer from forms of dementia or long-term illness. Some frail older residents are “unable to walk” or “unable to drive a vehicle”. These residents could “fall through the cracks” if “they are not part of the communication”. The challenges that residents encounter could lead them to “function in isolation” or “feel lonely”. The managers explained that such exclusion could affect the “well-being” of the residents and could “lead to depression”. Therefore, they contended that communication within the retirement village “keeps those residents connected to the community” and that it is “necessary to involve them”. The residents added that such residents could become more involved by being assisted by neighbourly and caring fellow residents: “... those who are close to you help you”. It was suggested that “support and a sense of belonging” are built when members “talk to others” and “participate in conversations”.

The principle of inclusivity and generating a sense of belonging echo the findings of Crestani and Taylor (2021), whose internal communication study confirms that two-way symmetrical principles, such as dialogue, contribute to a stronger sense of belonging. Moore *et al.* (2021) write that inclusivity promotes unity among employees. Similarly, Hafermalz and Riemer (2021) found effective communication to be essential for maintaining a team, and it relates to well-being, which is inherently connected to the performance of employees, as Mmutle (2022) also reported in a South African study. Hafermalz and Riemer (2021: 97) also found that a focus on being a team could relate to the idea of internal community, as we reported in our study, because at its core is the facilitation of internal stakeholders – through two-way symmetrical communication – “to be active participants” and “to support each other” in the internal environment. We conclude, therefore, that facilitating a sense of belonging through two-way symmetrical communication could achieve the outcome of developing internal communities that promote the well-being of internal stakeholders, as markedly illustrated in the case of the retirement village under study.

A feeling of belonging is defined by Hagerty *et al.* (1992:172) as an “experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment”. This definition links well to systems theory in terms of the characteristics of a symmetrical worldview of open systems influencing each other, which are interdependent and maintain a moving equilibrium with other systems (Grunig, 1989). The definition also reflects the African philosophy of ubuntu, which encompasses community, humanness, and unity (Broodryk, 2006a; Van Deventer, 2015), and which – through its two-way symmetrical communication aspects – includes viewing the preservation of a sense of belonging in a community through continuous dialogue, conversation, interdependence, inclusiveness, mutual trust, collective endeavours, and reciprocity (Arnoldi-Van der Walt, 2000; Crestani & Taylor, 2021). Such African ubuntu-centred communication practices (see Steenkamp & Rensburg, 2018) infused the two-way symmetrical communication approaches identified by the village members in the present study, reflecting local culture even as they yielded a key principle identified more broadly in the literature.

Participation and collaboration

The second theme of communication to develop internal communities is participation and collaboration. Many of the participants believed that the residents and management, all of them as members of the internal community, should actively participate in communication with each other. One resident noted that residents have “a need for face-to-face interpersonal conversation” with each other. Similarly, another resident indicated that “residents want to be heard”. The residents placed emphasis on interpersonal communication, with statements such as “we chat on my porch”, or “they stop me at the sports field” to talk.

Mention was also made by almost all the participants of the importance of participation and collaboration in decision-making. Although the residents, as shareholders of the village, should be included in financial decisions, the overall perception from the residents was that there were not enough opportunities for them to give input before big decisions were made. The residents felt that “they only inform us”, “they should ask us”, and “we want to influence decisions”. This view was echoed by some of the managers who stated that “there is very little opportunity for participation ... residents do not really participate in decision-making”. Both the residents and the managers agreed that this ought to be rectified because it creates a feeling of negativity between the different parties within the community. This correlates with literature that argues the importance of creating opportunities for participation in decision-making by internal stakeholders (Kim & Rhee, 2011), but that is challenging in most organisations (Toledano *et al.*, 2023). An internal community approach, as an opportunity to improve on the traditional management approach, could solve this challenge.

Notably, many of the residents and the managers showed appreciation for the executive manager and continuously confirmed his “accessibility” and “open-door policy” and the way he strove for collaboration in solving problems. The management and the residents highlighted the fact that “he treats everyone with respect and compassion”,

was “willing to listen”, was “easy to approach ... available to discuss matters”. The open line of communication seemed important in this internal community, just as in a traditional internal business environment where it has been found to assist in resolving and preventing conflict (Gara & Laporte, 2020).

The internal communication literature in the traditional internal environment aligns with the principles identified by the participants in the non-traditional environment. Kim and Rhee (2011) noted that true internal symmetrical communication is two-way communication with employees characterised by listening, opportunities for participation in decision-making processes, and accessibility. As also reported by Williams (2010), our data suggest that characteristics such as participation in decision-making, and opportunities to collaborate horizontally and vertically within an open system, are essential for creating (internal) communities successfully. Such communities are often defined by a participatory culture, which is widely evident in two-way symmetrical communication, as well as in ubuntu literature (Steenkamp & Rensburg, 2018). Falkheimer and Heide (2015) describe a participatory culture as having few barriers to participation, dedicated support for generosity, informal mentoring, members feeling that their contributions matter, and members care for others’ participation. Members of the organisation must be seen as equal, have the opportunity to provide input and express their respective viewpoints, and have their opinions appreciated (Grunig, 1992). Therefore, two-way symmetrical communication with dialogue and listening, and the balanced and equal flow of communication created thereby, are communication elements that help to constitute a participatory culture (Grunig, 1992; Grunig *et al.*, 2006). Hallahan (2004) also identified participation as a crucial element in community-building, and Kent *et al.* (2016) added that respect for other members facilitates community building in public relations.

Some authors view a participatory culture as vital to organisations because it creates room for internal stakeholders to work in teams to solve problems, or to produce new innovative ideas (Mygind, 2009). Innovation is seen as an important part of the symmetrical worldview, where innovative ideas and flexible thinking are encouraged (Grunig, 1989). This is consistent with research on the concept of co-creation with internal stakeholders (e.g. Schmeltz & Kjeldsen, 2019 – even though primarily from a branding and marketing perspective) but affirms the argument of building internal communities through collaboration and participation. Al-Omouh *et al.* (2021) also confirm that a sense of community plays a significant role in collaborative knowledge creation.

Our findings that a community is built when members genuinely try to think from others’ perspectives are consistent with Shen and Jiang’s (2021) research on internal community development. They are also consistent with an ubuntu perspective in which, as Broodryk (2006a) argues, participation is required to demonstrate solidarity, support, and cooperation.

Shared values

The third theme is shared values, which also involve understanding of each other's needs, having the same interests, and working towards the same goals. The managers and the residents noted that members in their internal community should "take responsibility for each other" and "care for each other" as part of "our values in the village" and part of "our social responsibility".

The managers and the residents gave the example of residents in the care unit who were blind and could not read the distributed communication, and who were helped by members of the internal community (residents and sometimes managers) who volunteered to read these documents to them: "Neighbours share the information and communication with them". A resident explained that "we care for each other and help each other". Another resident agreed because "it is our social responsibility, and we are doing our social good". The managers and the residents further explained that "we must develop and sustain our sense of community" by understanding and fulfilling each other's needs.

Another example that reinforced this principle was that not all the elderly residents were "tech savvy" and "do not even know how to use WhatsApp". Such residents were then "helped by someone they know", such as "a fellow resident" or a "neighbour". The feeling of this internal community was strengthened when members of the community acted in a caring manner. The participants elaborated that "there must be a sensitivity to understand each other's needs, concerns and perceptions". The executive manager pointed out that "this cannot happen in the mass but must rather be on an individual level" among community members.

Some of the participants took the idea of understanding and fulfilling each other's needs to the next level, explaining that "we as members" of the community "work very closely" and "we support each other on a very close level". Close involvement in the activities of the overall community was also highlighted. The fact that community members understood each other's needs was viewed as offering opportunities for the residents to become involved "in matters in which they have an interest"; understanding each other's needs and working together led to shared interests in the internal community.

Effective goal-oriented communication was also identified to build the internal community: "We need to communicate better with each other so that we understand each other better so that common goals can be achieved".

Once again, the conclusion can be drawn that the principles identified in internal communication literature to manage internal stakeholders in the traditional internal environment effectively are also found and relevant when building internal communities in the non-traditional internal context. Mainardes *et al.* (2012) found that organisations should establish processes that acknowledge and also understand the internal stakeholders' needs and interests and reconcile with them. Grunig *et al.* (2002) suggest that

the two-way symmetrical model be followed in attempts to achieve understanding and reconciliation, and to lead to a balance between the needs of the organisation and internal stakeholders. The purpose of the two-way symmetrical model is to establish mutual understanding between stakeholders and the organisation, as both parties participate in the communication process (Grunig, 1992). This requires that both parties must constantly adapt and change their viewpoint and behaviour, following their communication with each other, as they mutually influence each other (Grunig, 1992). Considering this, organisations need to adapt their strategy, objectives and vision, for example, according to the feedback they receive from internal stakeholders (Sosik *et al.*, 2002). Heath (2010) further states that the relationship between organisations and internal stakeholders is influenced by the interests and values that they share. Shared values, goals and interests in an organisation are therefore important, as they help its people to work better together (Grunig *et al.*, 2006).

Our participants' strong focus on care for one another, social responsiveness and being sensitive to each other's needs echo the ubuntu approach where individuals within a community prioritise the safety, welfare, and dignity of others before their own (Arnoldi-Van der Walt, 2000). Broodryk (2006b) notes that ubuntu is based on the way individuals treat each other. The ubuntu perspective relates to our identified principle of shared values based on "respect, dignity, acceptance and care" and "a spirit of service" (Arnoldi-Van der Walt, 2000: 113-114).

We argue that shared values and interests are a key component of the community perspective, seeing that these principles are necessary to establish a community in the first place, confirming what Shen and Jiang (2021) identified in their research. They found that tenets for establishing and sustaining communities in the field of internal communication and public relations, such as a commitment to certain core communal values and beliefs, shared interests and norms, and agreed-upon rules between internal community members enable them to work toward their common goals. Likewise, our principle of shared values, understanding each other's needs, having the same interests, and working towards the same goal resonates with the internal community perspective, which states that community development depends hereon.

Transparency and ethical communication

The fourth theme is transparency and ethical communication, which includes open and honest communication for the development of internal communities. The managers and residents felt that it is vital that "decisions are made in a transparent manner", that "policy should be applied consistently", and that there is "no secrecy" among internal community members. The participants pointed out that when communication in an internal community setting is not transparent and ethical, it "creates an opportunity for stories to spread through the grapevine". They continuously emphasised that "open", "honest" and "transparent" communication is "necessary and desired" to build the community.

Ethical and transparent communication is a critical aspect of the two-way symmetrical approach and also resonates with the ubuntu philosophy. Likewise, our findings suggest that two-way symmetrical communication which incorporates open, honest,

transparent, and collaborative communication between parties within a community mindset rather than a management mindset would be ethical at its core. This links with Huang's (2004) and Crestani and Taylor's (2021) results which suggest that symmetrical communication is built on honest, transparent and equal communication, and therefore inherently ethical by nature. Huang (2004) explains in her empirical study that one of the critical aspects of ethical communication is whether one's communication is truthful and sincere. These results supported Grunig and Grunig's (1996: 40) argument that "public relations will be inherently ethical if it follows the principles of the two-way symmetrical model". The model is therefore normative and describes the measure that organisations and internal stakeholders, or internal communities, should pursue. It further links with the ubuntu perspective which requires transparency (Broodryk, 2006a), doing what is morally right, and acting with integrity (Broodryk, 2006b). Steenkamp and Rensburg (2018) state that ubuntu is based on ethical values such as fairness, transparency and morality. Internal communities should draw on these ethical values to guide their communication practices.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

This study contributes to the growing research on internal communication in the South African context by rethinking the principles that contribute to the development of internal communities. Even though the concept of communities has been thoroughly examined in the field of development communication and public relations, the focus on communities in the sub-discipline of internal communication is under-researched, and even more so from scholars in the South African context and in case studies with non-traditional organisations.

In this study, the proposed research question was answered, namely: What communication principles can be inductively drawn from members of internal communities within a non-traditional internal environment to build the community? We inductively identified communication themes from members of a retirement village's perspective and clustered these together into four overarching principles. These are considered the communication principles needed to build internal communities in this context. They focus on members' well-being in an internal community setting and are identified as: (1) inclusivity and a sense of belonging; (2) participation and collaboration; (3) shared values; and (4) transparency and ethical communication. Furthermore, we show that these communication principles are aligned with the normative two-way symmetrical communication worldview and belong together, suggesting that two-way symmetrical communication in the internal environment remains relevant – also in the South African context.

The study further indicates that these communication principles speak to the ubuntu philosophy. The African values present in the ubuntu approach relate to the two-way symmetrical communication principles. It becomes clear that ubuntu-centred communication is needed to build internal communities in the non-traditional internal context. We further argue that African moral philosophy, such as ubuntu, which is

relevant in the South African internal communication setting, should be explored further in Western contexts, considering that these humanistic values in a community setting are universal (Steenkamp & Rensburg, 2018).

Previously, participation and collaboration were identified in public relations research as principles that could assist in community building (Hallahan, 2004; Hou & Macnamara, 2017; Sollis, 2023; Sommerfeldt, 2013), and the concept of shared values and interests was identified as a means to develop internal communities (Shen & Jiang, 2021), confirmed by the findings from our case study. However, our research yielded two further principles: a sense of belonging, and transparency and ethical communication, neither of which have been recognised in limited previous research on fostering internal communities. Therefore, this study contributes to the public relations body of knowledge on internal communication in community building.

On the other hand, dialogue and relationships, which were identified in previous research on communities from a public relations perspective (Kent *et al.*, 2016; Valentini *et al.*, 2012), were not communication principles that emerged explicitly from our study. However, we argue that none of the communication principles we identified can stand without dialogue. Dialogue is an obvious contributor to all four communication principles needed to build internal communities and also links with the two-way symmetrical worldview and ubuntu philosophy. Furthermore, even though there was no specific mention of relationships in our principles, we argue that relationships will be the outflow of the communication principles applied in an internal community setting.

Additionally, it is apparent that some two-way symmetrical communication principles that feature in public relations literature to strategically manage internal communication and internal stakeholders in the traditional internal organisation structure (Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Kang & Sung, 2017) also apply to the internal community approach. Therefore, we argue that the principles do not change. What is different is the goal and how it is applied to reach that goal. When considering the internal community approach, the focus is not on the organisation's dominance or benefit (Holtzhausen, 2012), but on the community members' well-being and broader societal good (Shen & Jiang, 2021). In an internal setting, the attitude is to participate and collaborate as community members on the same level, as opposed to a hierarchical structure where internal stakeholders are managed, influenced or controlled. Although it can be said that the result will still be profitability because previous studies linked well-being to engagement, satisfaction, and productivity, which ultimately leads to the success and survival of the organisation (e.g. Bakker & Demerouti, 2018; Men & Robinson, 2018), the ultimate outcome should be to contribute to social harmony (Kent *et al.*, 2016).

Thus, with an internal community approach, the path to reach the goal is different (with members' well-being and the greater good of the community in mind), but the principles remain the same as in traditional internal communication theory and yield the same benefits when internal communication and relationships are managed from a functionalist and achievement-oriented perspective. This is something that internal communication scholars could further investigate and consider for practical implications.

Recently there has been an increased focus on the well-being of internal stakeholders (Ćorić *et al.*, 2020; Walden, 2021), rather than just managing them for organisational effectiveness, as we maintain in this study. The non-traditional internal community idea of this study contributes to the importance placed on human well-being and community good and argues for the well-being of vulnerable groups of society, such as the participants of the retirement village we used as a case study. The link between a community approach and the well-being of community members, especially in the post-COVID-19 internal environment, needs to be extended in future research.

Our study is limited in its qualitative nature and single case study approach; thus it is not generalisable. Given this limitation, the aim was to explore the basic communication principles of a community-building approach in an internal environment whose core business is specifically focused on the well-being of its members. We discovered four communication principles needed to foster internal communities, which offer a starting point for future research on these key concepts in internal communication from a public relations approach. Future studies can pursue this direction and test the findings by quantitatively exploring them in a larger population and in other non-traditional internal environments. These non-traditional environments could include students at universities, who are not employees but are central to the mission of the university, and therefore could form part of an internal community, for example.

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