

Online stakeholder relationship strategies on Facebook used by South African universities

ABSTRACT

The use of social networking sites is becoming increasingly essential to communicate and establish long-term relationships with stakeholders. In order for universities to retain their stakeholders, the effective use of media like Facebook is evident. This study investigated the Facebook pages of 24 South African universities by means of a content analysis, to determine how they have structured and populated their Facebook pages with different types of content that could be relevant to their public relations communication strategies. The theoretical basis of the content analysis consisted of the three virtual communication strategies developed by Waters et al. (2009), namely *disclosure*, *information dissemination* and *involvement*. This study came to the general conclusion that South African universities had not yet capitalised on Facebook to fully integrate the three virtual communication strategies in order to enhance online stakeholder relationships.

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INTRODUCTION

The expansion of various new media has significantly empowered a wide variety of strategic publics by giving them dynamic new communication media, which many are using to communicate effectively with a variety of internal and external audiences (Wright & Hinson, 2009:25; 2012:3). Increased use of social networking sites has brought about a major shift in the practice of public relations (Fischer, 2011:1). In fact, social networking sites are changing the ways in which organisations communicate with strategic sections of their public such as employees, customers, shareholders, communities, government, and other stakeholders, encouraging them to create corporate profile and to interact with their members (Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009:102; Wright & Hinson, 2009:25; 2012:3). According to Chung, Lee and Humphrey (2010:1), use of these social networking sites enables organisations to improve and rework their communication programmes.

Universities worldwide are competing for recognition and the achievement of a competitive advantage. Although Ssebuwufu, Ludwick and Beland (2012:11) state that African universities are enhancing their relationships with their stakeholders, there is a lack of literature on African university-stakeholder relationships. Stephanica (2014:498) also concludes that universities that have successfully integrated social networking sites— specifically Facebook — into their corporate communication strategies, have shown that these media can foster a sense of community, leading to informal communication and the development of improved university-stakeholder relationships. Given the importance of stakeholders for universities' corporate reputation and stability, there is a crucial need for South African universities to establish excellent online stakeholder relationships. The increasing use of Facebook by South African universities, as mentioned by Shambare and Mvula (2011:10557), provides an additional reason for studying Facebook in the context of South African universities. The study of Waters et al. (2009) was used as a blueprint for this study and as a theoretical background to analyse the use of Facebook at South African universities.

Little is known about how South African universities structure and populate their Facebook pages with content relevant to fostering stakeholder relations. It is also not known whether the virtual communication strategies formulated by Waters et al. (2009), namely *disclosure*, *information dissemination* and *involvement*, can be applied to South African universities' Facebook pages.

With regard to the above research problem, the following four research objectives were formulated, constituting the four research questions addressed in the study:

- (i) To determine in which way and to what extent South African universities *disclose* information about themselves on Facebook.
- (ii) To determine in which way and to what extent South African universities *disseminate* other types of information on Facebook to their stakeholders.
- (iii) To determine in which way and to what extent South African universities use Facebook content to foster *involvement* between them and their stakeholders.
- (iv) To determine if and how South African universities *differ* in the way they structure and populate their Facebook pages with content.

1. CORPORATE COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

According to Gomez Vasquez and Soto Velez (2011:157), and Waters et al. (2009:102), companies worldwide are embracing and adapting social networking sites for various purposes: customer service, marketing, organisational communication, public relations and corporate social responsibility. Corporate communicators are increasingly realising that the use of social networking sites is changing the way stakeholders and companies communicate daily, particularly because of the opportunities offered by such sites for collaboration, participation, interactivity, and engagement (Gomez et al., 2011:157). Therefore, organisations should strive to establish good corporate communication strategies, using efficient communication channels such as social networking sites to effectively communicate with stakeholders.

Corporate communication has undergone a significant evolution over the years, with researchers offering a range of definitions. Corporate communication can be defined as a management function that offers a framework and vocabulary for the effective co-ordination of all media of communication, with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining a favourable reputation with stakeholders and groups upon which the organisation is dependent (Cornelissen, 2004:23). Van der Waldt (2004:135) defines corporate communication as the sum of all the communication efforts within an organisation that are generated to achieve company objectives. Thus, corporate communication is crucial to ensure efficient organisational functioning as it allows organisations to understand and build mutual relationships with their stakeholders.

Looking at the managerial form of corporate communication, it is evident that the use of social networking sites has given managers various other tools to communicate more effectively. In fact, Aula and Mantere (2008:9) state that the focus of corporate management is shifting from managing people, operations and processes to managing networks. In the study of Erasmus (2012), it was reported that the emergence of social networking sites in South Africa has changed the way in which organisations communicate and deal with both internal and external communication. Ferreira (2008:30) also comments that the rise in popularity of social networking sites has rendered many managers to be more appreciative of this collaborative technology. Therefore, successful stakeholder management depends on effective communication and the relationship between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders that are built and developed using a broader range of communication strategies and practices (Geller, 2009:2).

Marketing communication is another important tool in establishing a positive and beneficial image of the goods and services offered by organisations. Marketing communication has rapidly evolved into a more dynamic process as a result of the use of social networking sites. In fact, Chikandiwa (2013:3) states that organisations in South Africa – banks in particular – have been among the first to adopt social networking sites for marketing communication purposes. Although managers of South African banks use social networking sites, they still have not yet fully integrated the use of such sites into their marketing communication mix strategy. Therefore, the adoption of social networking sites in marketing can be beneficial in terms of information dissemination, quick product adoption and cost reduction (Castronovo & Huang, 2012:118).

In addition, organisational communication and public relations have shifted from traditional to more dynamic communication processes. The emergence of social networking sites has transformed the practice of public relations within the organisational environment. Gomez Vasquez and Soto Velez (2011:163) argue that as research on social networking sites, corporate communication and public relations are extended, organisations around the world will understand the influential role that social networking sites has to play in internal and external communications. According to a study conducted by Erasmus (2012) on the use of social networking sites for public relations, results showed that, generally, social networking sites have a positive effect on public relations practice in South Africa. Although the overall perception of public relations practitioners is positive, especially when compared to that of the traditional media, some public relations practitioners are still hesitant to fully use social networking sites, mainly because of reservations regarding issues such as accuracy, truth and ethical standards.

Corporate communication is considered to be one of the most important links between an organisation and the various sectors of its public. Universities, as corporate organisations, need to implement effective corporate communication strategies which will benefit and enhance stakeholder relationships. According to Stephanica (2014:492), the advance of technology, specifically the emergence of social networking sites, has created tremendous opportunities for universities. Therefore, to achieve a competitive advantage and enhance reputation, universities must engage in mutually beneficial relationships with key stakeholders through effective corporate communication.

2. FACEBOOK AND ONLINE UNIVERSITY-STAKEHOLDER RELATIONS

The emergence of social networking sites has brought about changes in the way that universities worldwide communicate with their stakeholders. According to Boesso and Kumar (2008:66), the current demand for increased disclosure, effective communication and excellent stakeholder relationships have been emphasised by the popularity of the stakeholder approach. Organisations are now using various methods in order to communicate with stakeholders, ranging from traditional media to social networking sites such as Facebook (Stephanica, 2014:495).

In terms of the globalisation of Higher Education, universities around the world are under pressure to maintain efficient corporate management standards, while using the resources allocated to them correctly (Stephanica, 2014:493). Stakeholder relationship is the foundation for developing and implementing strategies, specifically in connection with corporate communication and sustainability. Based on the importance of corporate communication to their reputation and achievement, universities, and especially South African universities, should strive to establish and maintain good online relationships with their stakeholders. Embracing online stakeholder engagement is likely to make universities more identifiable (Adams, 2013:2). As a result of this process, relationships could be built according to organisational objectives and values (Mainardes et al., 2010:230).

Universities around the world are starting to use social networking sites such as Facebook for corporate communication purposes (Waters et al., 2009:102; Stephanica, 2014:495). Zulhamri (2009:47) states that every organisation needs to be aware of the divergent concerns of stakeholders when selecting communication channels to communicate with them. The results of a study on Romanian public and private universities, showed that most of those universities use Facebook as the main social networking site to engage with their stakeholders in an attempt to strengthen their relationships (Stephanica, 2014:496). Hence, Waters et al. (2009:106) suggest that social networking sites, specifically Facebook, can be an effective way to reach stakeholders when implementing the three virtual communication strategies, namely disclosure, information dissemination and involvement.

In addition, according to the survey conducted among 133 African universities by Ssebuwufu, Ludwick and Beland (2012:11) in order to investigate the extent and nature of African universities' external stakeholder relationships, there was evidence of preliminary steps taken by these universities to encourage and develop their connections with their various stakeholders. However, there is a lack of more detailed information on these steps that the African universities are taking, and also on which communication channels could be used to provide a stronger and more comprehensive platform to stimulate, construct, and manage stakeholder relationships (Ssebuwufu, Ludwick & Beland, 2012:11). Therefore, given the potential of Facebook in establishing dialogical relationships, universities – and African and South African universities specifically – should capitalise on this medium to enhance online stakeholder relationships (Perez, De Jesus Araiza & Doerfer, 2013:3260).

In this study the three virtual communication strategies of Waters et al. (2009:102), namely disclosure, information dissemination and involvement, will be used as main variables to determine how South African Universities use them to construct online relationships with their various stakeholders.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in this study was broadly similar to that of Waters et al. (2009), which followed a content analysis approach to collect and analyse a sample of Facebook pages in terms of three virtual communication strategies. This approach was deemed suitable for this study, because it had the possibility to answer the overall research question, namely how South African universities structure and populate their Facebook pages with content that is relevant to the public relations communication actions of the universities. In the process a number of more detailed research questions formulated in terms of the three strategies were also addressed. Content analysis categories similar to those of Waters et al. (2009) were therefore used to investigate the occurrence of the three virtual communication strategies on the Facebook pages of South African universities. Only content appearing on the pages from 1 May 2013 to 3 June 2013 were considered for the study.

3.1 Target population of university Facebook pages

The target universum/population for the content analysis of this study consisted of the Facebook pages of all South African universities, and as they were all accessible on the Internet, no sampling of university Facebook pages was needed. However, only universities with an official Facebook page at the time of the study could be considered for inclusion. Of the 23 South African universities, one did not have a Facebook profile at that time, namely Vaal University of Technology (VUT), but North-West University (NWU) had three independent Facebook pages that were included in the analysis, resulting in 24 pages being studied.

3.2 Coding categories and procedures for addressing research questions

The university Facebook pages were analysed by means of content categories depicting the three virtual communication strategies of Waters et al. (2009). All the posts appearing on all the pages in the predetermined period were scrutinised. Specific guidelines for the coding process were developed: Only the first top visible layer of the university Facebook page was analysed, but more deeply embedded information accessible via the *about* and the *notes* links were also analysed, because information found on those two links supplied valuable data relevant to certain disclosure strategy categories.

The study's first research objective was to determine the ways and extent to which South African universities *disclose* information about themselves on Facebook. The following content categories – similar to those of Waters et al. (2009:104) – were considered relevant to coding purposes: *description* (of university programmes/services), *history* (academic), *mission statement*, URL (university Web address), *logo*, *administrators* (list) and *map*.

The second research objective aimed to establish the ways and extent to which South African universities *disseminate* other types of information on Facebook to their stakeholders. The following content categories were used: *news links* (links to news items), *photographs*, *videos* and *audio files*, *posts* (announcements), *press releases*, *campaign summaries*, *people talking* (about the institution), *alumni* and number of *likes*.

The third research objective sought to investigate the ways and extent to which South African universities use Facebook content to foster *involvement* between them and their stakeholders. In the process, the following categories were examined: *e-mail addresses*, *phone number*, *discussion wall* (including comments on posts, *recent posts by others* and *recommendations*), *calendar of events*, *volunteer opportunities*, *donations* and *e-commerce store*.

After having finalised the coding sheet, a pilot analysis was done by two coders who first scrutinised all the saved Facebook pages and then tested the coding sheet on four Facebook pages. During the training sessions, the coders discussed the various aspects of the coding sheet and the guidelines to ensure a common understanding. After some inter-coder reliability tests (see below), final agreement was reached regarding the coding process and rules, and the coders were ready to code the Facebook pages of the universities individually.

The findings with regard to the above-mentioned three research objectives were to be presented statistically by means of non-inferential statistical techniques such as frequencies and percentages. For example, the total number or percentage of universities using a particular content category could be taken as an indication of the *way in which* that category was being used for a certain strategy, while for every individual category the total number (and also the individual numbers) of words/occurrences attributed to the various universities was an indication of the *extent to which* the category was being used.

The fourth research objective was to ascertain whether there is a *difference* in the way South African universities structure and populate their Facebook pages with content relevant to the public relations communication actions of those universities, and if so, to establish in which ways they do differ. This was investigated statistically by conducting chi-square tests, where feasible, on the frequencies of occurrence found for each of the above-mentioned content categories. This was done for each category of each strategy by considering the frequencies (as presented in each column of Tables 1 to 3 below) as an empirical distribution, and comparing it with a theoretical distribution of frequencies that would have occurred if all universities had used that category in equal proportions. The statistical probability (p) of every calculated chi-square value appearing by chance was then determined. In every case where this probability was smaller than 0.01, it was concluded that the empirical distribution differed from the theoretical distribution statistically significant on the 1% level (which implies that one could state with 99% confidence that the universities had used that category differently). The detailed nature of every significant difference was ascertained by inspection of the relevant frequencies.

3.3 Inter-coder reliability test

The content analysis was not done subjectively by one coder, but in a uniform manner by two trained coders, and only after a series of inter-coder reliability tests had been conducted to ensure that both coders understood and applied the content categories similarly. Scott's pi test was used (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2010). For all categories of all three strategies, the calculated pi agreement coefficient had to be 0.80 or higher, which was eventually obtained.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings regarding universities' Facebook strategy for disclosure

As the study's above-mentioned research questions were formulated in terms of investigating *in which way* and *to what extent* the various communication strategies were used on Facebook, the findings are reported here in this two-fold format. With regard to the *ways in which* the universities tended to make use of the Facebook categories for the purpose of the disclosure strategy, Table 1 shows that of the seven Facebook disclosure categories, the two categories that were used most frequently by the universities were *URL* (used by 88% of the

universities) and *logo* (used by all the universities). Two other disclosure categories were used by just over half of the universities, namely *mission statement* (54% of the universities) and *description* (58% of the universities).

Table 1: Content categories depicting disclosure on Facebook pages

University	Disclosure content categories (frequencies)						
	Description words	History words	Mission words	URL count	Logo count	Map count	Administrators count
CPUT	0	0	40	1	1	1	0
CUT	515	0	72	1	1	1	0
DUT	6	0	0	1	1	0	0
MUT	40	37	63	1	1	0	0
NMMU	52	5	41	1	1	0	0
NWU-MAF	67	0	0	0	1	0	0
NWU-POTCH	0	0	35	1	1	0	0
NWU-VAALTR	278	0	23	1	1	0	0
RU	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
SUN	15	0	0	1	1	1	0
TUT	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
UCT	0	361	0	7	1	0	0
UFH	26	0	38	5	1	0	0
UFS	219	0	0	1	1	0	0
UJ	212	324	166	1	1	0	0
UKZN	474	346	0	1	1	1	0
UL	0	0	4	1	1	0	0
UNISA	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
UNIVEN	170	0	39	1	1	1	0
UP	0	0	19	1	1	0	0
UWC	0	12	257	1	1	1	0
UZULU	64	0	27	0	1	0	0
WITS	0	0	0	5	1	0	0
WSU	89	12	130	1	1	0	0
Totals	2227	1097	954	35	24	7	0
χ^2 (df= 23) p	χ^2 =5432.5; p<0.01	χ^2 =6706.7; p<0.01	χ^2 =2285.3; p<0.01	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable
Universities involved	14 (58%)	7 (29%)	13 (54%)	21 (88%)	24 (100%)	7 (29%)	0 (0%)

The *extent to which* the disclosure virtual communication strategy appears on the universities' Facebook pages was measured by determining the frequency of occurrence in each disclosure category. The shaded cells in Table 1 show that the three categories with the highest word counts were *description* (with a total of 2227 words on all the pages), *history* (1097 words) and *mission statement* (954 words). In the *description* category, the universities with the highest word count were the Central University of Technology (CUT) with 515 words, that constituted 23.1% of all the words in this category on all the pages studied; the University of Kwazulu-Natal (UKZN) with 474 words, and the North West University's Vaal Triangle campus (NWU-VAALTR), with 278 words. With regard to the *history* category the highest word counts were found on the Facebook pages of UCT (361 words, which was 32.9% of all the words in this category), followed by UKZN (346 words) and UJ (324 words), while the *mission statement* category was used most by UWC (257 words), followed by UJ (166 words), and WSU (130 words).

4.2 Findings regarding universities' Facebook strategy for information dissemination

With regard to the *ways in which* the universities made use of the Facebook categories for the purpose of the information dissemination strategy, Table 2 shows that the only types of information distributed by all universities (100%) via their Facebook pages were *other posted items*, *people talking* about their institution, as well as the number of *likes* of their Facebook page. Other categories of information that were well represented and widely distributed were *photographs* (83% of the universities had visible photographs on their pages), *suggested links* to other Facebook pages (also 83% of the universities) and *news links* (67% of the universities). Four further categories (counts of *campaigns*, *videos*, *press releases* and *suggested Facebook pages*) were hardly used at all by the universities, and did not warrant inclusion in the table.

The *extent to which* the information dissemination virtual communication strategy appears on the universities' Facebook pages shows that the three most prominent categories that were measured by word counts were *other posted items* (with a total of 19329 words on all the pages), *photographs* (3228 words) and *news links* (1779 words), displaying a relatively large number of words on the Facebook pages. Three other prominent categories (measured in terms of counts of people mentioned) were the number of *likes* (with a total of 337896 people), *alumni* (104153 people) and *people talking* about the institution (14586 people).

It was found that in the *other posted items* category, the three universities with the highest word counts were North West University's Vaal Triangle campus (NWU-VAALTR) with 2779 words (14.4% of all the words in this category), followed by North West University's Mafikeng campus (NWU-MAF) with 2251 words and the Walter Sisulu University (WSU) with 2047 words. In the *photographs* category, the three highest incidence of photographs were found on the Facebook pages of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) (429 photographs), Rhodes University (RU) (404 photographs), and North West University's Potchefstroom campus (NWU-POTCH) (346 photographs).

Table 2: Content categories depicting information dissemination on Facebook pages

University	Information dissemination content categories (frequencies)*								
	Newslinks count	News Links words	Photos All count	Photos words	Other Posts count	Other Posts words	People Talk count	Alumni count	Likes count
CPUT	0	0	0	0	7	193	158	0	6465
CUT	2	77	2	83	21	501	324	4002	4463
DUT	21	162	0	0	2	25	71	0	3047
MUT	0	0	0	0	6	133	155	0	7025
NMMU	0	0	429	48	29	711	1006	0	11274
NWU-MAF	0	0	66	487	49	2251	1680	0	9826
NWU-POTCH	40	0	346	47	11	282	219	12863	16112
NWU-VAALTR	8	328	305	994	61	2779	237	0	4469
RU	2	5	404	198	9	181	156	0	9789
SUN	15	113	6	89	5	105	335	36009	25141
TUT	0	0	192	140	42	1342	145	0	4194
UCT	2	64	2	0	21	477	289	0	19999
UFH	0	0	225	70	7	199	277	0	4285
UFS	6	279	97	89	57	1892	936	3757	13126
UJ	3	70	84	436	67	1827	2512	32735	28218
UKZN	2	77	141	194	29	1166	422	0	15143
UL	0	0	1	0	5	116	15	0	292
UNISA	2	67	8	13	24	933	3297	0	113305
UNIVEN	0	0	1	0	4	48	96	0	1223
UP	10	181	1	3	22	467	174	0	3372
UWC	8	279	3	15	27	875	176	0	977
UZULU	1	30	0	0	14	457	193	3707	2320
WITS	4	47	4	70	10	322	880	11080	27625
WSU	1	0	147	252	72	2047	833	0	6206
Totals	127	1779	2464	3228	601	19329	14586	104153	337896
χ^2 (df= 23) p	$\chi^2 = 360.0$; $p < 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 3125.1$; $p < 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 4450.9$; $p < 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 8762.3$; $p < 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 431.8$; $p < 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 18471.0$; $p < 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 25276.1$ $p < 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 518083.4$ $p < 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 844304.5$; $p < 0.01$
Universities involved	16 (67%)	14 (58%)	20 (83%)	17 (71%)	24 (100%)	24 (100%)	24 (100%)	7 (29%)	24 (100%)

*Due to low frequencies of occurrence, findings for categories *campaigns*, *videos*, *press releases* and *suggested Facebook pages* are not shown in the table

With regard to the *news links* category, it was found that over 50% of the total of news links were disseminated by only three universities. The highest frequencies of news links were found on the Facebook pages of NWU-POTCH (40 links, 31.5%), followed by Durban University of Technology (DUT) (21 links), and SUN (15 links). In addition, the highest people counts in terms of *people talking* were found on the Facebook pages of the University of South Africa (UNISA) (3297), UJ (2512), and NWU-MAF (1680). Regarding the *alumni* category, the highest counts of former students were found on the pages of SUN (36009), and UJ (32735). In terms of *likes*, the only relatively high people count was found on the Facebook page of UNISA (113305).

4.3 Findings regarding universities' Facebook strategy for involvement

With regard to the *ways in which* the universities made use of the Facebook categories for the purpose of the involvement strategy, it was found that only the *discussion wall* category was utilised by all (100%) of the universities to interact with their stakeholders. Just over half (58%) of the universities used *volunteer opportunities* to engage with their public. Only 50% of the universities used *e-mail addresses*, while 75% of them used *phone numbers*. The two other Involvement categories, namely *calendar of events* and *donations*, were used by relatively few of the universities.

Table 3: Content categories depicting involvement on Facebook pages

University	Involvement content categories (frequencies)							
	Email Address count	Phone No count	DiscWall All count	DiscWall words	Calendar Events words	Volunteer Opp count	Volunteer Opps words	Donations words
CPUT	1	1	120	230	0	0	0	0
CUT	0	1	237	667	0	4	96	0
DUT	0	0	15	130	0	1	38	0
MUT	0	1	80	166	0	0	0	0
NMMU	1	1	410	778	0	0	0	36
NWU-MAF	1	1	7539	1189	0	1	75	0
NWU-POTCH	1	1	117	269	0	0	0	0
NWU-VAALTR	1	1	190	845	91	6	240	0
RU	1	1	58	300	0	2	24	0
SUN	1	1	41	264	0	0	0	0
TUT	0	0	177	58	0	1	0	0
UCT	0	1	122	517	0	1	0	0
UFH	0	1	113	221	0	2	99	0
UFS	1	1	538	1056	0	4	169	5

UJ	0	1	759	1650	0	2	42	97
UKZN	0	1	349	539	0	2	49	0
UL	0	0	45	97	0	0	0	0
UNISA	1	0	4691	916	0	0	0	0
UNIVEN	1	1	139	91	0	0	0	0
UP	0	0	43	212	0	3	59	40
UWC	0	1	73	538	22	0	0	0
UZULU	1	1	497	315	49	0	0	0
WITS	1	1	130	552	0	5	219	0
WSU	0	0	9597	1437	17	4	218	0
Totals	12	18	26080	13037	179	38	1328	178
χ^2 (df= 23) p	Not applicable	Not applicable	$\chi^2 = 132739$ $p < 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 8345.2$; $p < 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 1356.9$ p < 0.01	Not applicable	$\chi^2 = 2574.8$; p < 0.01	$\chi^2 = 1484.5$; p < 0.01
Universities involved	12 (50%)	18 (75%)	24 (100%)	24 (100%)	4 (17%)	14 (58%)	12 (50%)	4 (17%)

The frequencies indicative of the *extent to which* the Involvement virtual communication strategy appeared on the universities' Facebook pages re-emphasise that the *discussion wall* category was the most prominent involvement category. Those universities contributing most to the number of posts in the discussion wall category were WSU (9597 posts, 36.8% of the total), and NWU-MAF (7539 posts). The universities contributing most to the *word count* in the discussion wall category were UJ with 1650 words and WSU (1437 words). With regard to the word counts in the *volunteer opportunities* category, only three universities had sizeable word counts (more than 200 words), namely NWU-VAALTR, WITS, and WSU.

4.4 Findings regarding differences between universities' Facebook pages

The chi-square test was used to investigate whether or not the universities differed with regard to the way in which they populated their Facebook pages with content for purposes of each of the three communication strategies. With regard to the *disclosure* strategy (Table 1), it was found that the frequencies recorded for four categories (*URL*, *logo*, *map* and *administrators*) were too low to allow meaningful chi-square calculations or conclusions. However, the chi-square values for the word counts in the *description*, *history* and *mission statement* content categories were statistically significant on the 1% level. This indicates that the South African universities differed significantly in how they disclosed information of their institution on their Facebook pages, specifically with regard to the *extent* that these three content categories were used (see details in section 4.1 above). Therefore, as far as could be ascertained, the universities populated their Facebook pages differently with content for purposes of *disclosure*.

With regard to the *ways in* which the universities structure and populate their Facebook pages with content for the purpose of the *information dissemination* strategy (Table 2), it was found that the frequencies recorded for four categories (*campaigns, videos, press releases* and *suggested Facebook pages*) were too low to allow any meaningful comparisons or calculations, but that for six categories the calculated chi-square values were statistically significant on the 1% level. These six Information dissemination categories were *news links* (count and words recorded separately), *photos* (count and words), *other posts* (count and words), *people talk, alumni, and likes*.

The most prominent differences found in the patterns regarding the *extent to which* the universities used these categories have already been described in section 4.2 above, and the calculated p and chi-square values in Table 2 confirm that these patterns are significant. It can therefore be concluded that the universities differed with regard to the *extent* that they used these nine categories for purposes of information dissemination via Facebook.

With regard to the *way in* which the universities populated their Facebook pages with content for the purpose of the *involvement* strategy (Table 3), it was found that the frequencies for three categories (*e-mail addresses, phone numbers* and *volunteer opportunities*) were too low for chi-square calculations, but that for the remaining four categories (counts of *discussion wall* posts and words, and counts of words dealing with *calendar of events, volunteer opportunities* and *donations*) the chi-square values were statistically significant on the 1% level. This means that the universities differed in the *extent to which* they used these content categories as communication platforms to engage with their stakeholders. The chi-square values in Table 3 confirm that such differences, as already described in section 4.3 above, are noteworthy.

5. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the content visible on the top layer of 24 Facebook pages of 22 South African universities, the study uncovered that the universities have not yet taken full advantage in using Facebook as medium of communication. Similar to the conclusions of the study of Waters et al. (2009:104), this study found that South African universities did not efficiently implement the three virtual communication strategies identified as *disclosure, information dissemination* and *involvement*. These virtual communication strategies were analysed independently, and it appeared that the second strategy (information dissemination) was the most exploited. Even though some components/categories of the information dissemination strategy were strongly utilised, it was found that many of them were barely used, or practically not used at all.

South African universities have acknowledged the advantage of using Facebook and have clearly realised the usefulness of creating Facebook pages, but they are evidently not yet using this medium strategically enough to optimally enhance their visibility, communicate information and interact with their stakeholders. The study's Facebook analysis reveals the universities' desire to fit into the new environment, but also shows that they have not yet fully embraced the potential of using Facebook as a communication medium.

The findings show that South African universities have been trying to establish an online openness and transparency on Facebook. About half of the universities included in the study used Facebook to disclose information about themselves, such as their *description*, *mission statement*, *a link to their website* (URL), their *logo* and *map*. Scholars have recently been emphasising the use of Facebook as a strategic communication medium for organisations to raise visibility and to manage communication, as well as to build and maintain strong relationships with stakeholders (McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009:221; Waters et al., 2009:102). However, South African universities have not fully used this as a medium of strategic communication to reveal themselves to their relevant stakeholders.

In addition, South African universities are increasingly providing links to *news articles*, *photographs* and *posted items* on their Facebook pages. This study showed that most of them provide valuable information via Facebook, such as the number of people *talking* about the institution, the number of *likes* and the suggested *Facebook pages*. *Information dissemination* was the most prominent strategy among the three communication strategies. As a result, the universities interacted mostly with their stakeholders via online Facebook *discussion walls*. The more they posted information, the more they received feedback from their stakeholders. This large-scale use of *discussion walls* indicates that South African universities want to actively engage with their stakeholders.

Facebook, in a unique way, has allowed South African universities to enhance their public relations communication actions by emphasising communication and helping them to engage in “interactive dialogue with their stakeholders” (Laaksonen & Neiglick, 2011:1). Facebook has encouraged South African universities to develop and maintain online relationships with their stakeholders. Even though this study did not measure the effectiveness of Facebook in cultivating relationships, the results indicate that the universities do use this medium to distribute different types of information and engage with their stakeholders.

There were, however, many differences between the universities regarding the *ways in which* they structured and populated their Facebook pages. In fact, all the Chi-square values that could be calculated were statistically significant on the 1% level. This means that the universities noticeably differed from one another with regard to the *extent to which* they incorporated the three virtual communication strategies of Waters et al. (2009:102-106) on their Facebook pages. Some disclosed more information about their institution than others, some distributed very little content compared to others while others used different elements to engage with their stakeholders.

Facebook has been shown to be a potentially efficient medium for the disclosure and dissemination of information, as well as for building relationships. Better relationships are created when organisations are able to communicate efficiently with their stakeholders and a mutual understanding exists. However, South African universities should strive to incorporate more of the components or content categories depicting the three virtual communication strategies namely disclosure, information dissemination and involvement, to establish and maintain long-term relationships with their stakeholders.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

This is one of the first studies to analyse the presence of variables representing virtual communication strategies on South African universities' Facebook pages. This study has raised the importance of establishing online stakeholder relationships through the implementation of virtual communication strategies, and has presented a challenge to South African universities to develop and incorporate such strategies in order to maintain long-term online stakeholder relationships. It is recommended that South African universities use the results of this study to develop new online stakeholder relationship strategies and policies.

Another recommendation is that South African universities should disclose more relevant information about themselves on social networking sites such as Facebook. Information on *corporate history*, *mission* and *description* are likely to influence stakeholder interests and decisions.

Universities are recommended to distribute a variety of types of information, ranging from visual, textual and audio messages to campaign summaries and press releases. The frequency with which information is distributed, also constitutes an important factor: the more frequently information is disseminated, the more frequently feedback is received and engagement facilitated. Through effective message distribution on Facebook, universities can successfully trigger stakeholder engagement and build strong online stakeholder relationships.

An excellent university-stakeholder relationship is the key to achieving a competitive advantage. Facebook is also identified as an excellent medium to enhance online involvement and cultivate stakeholder relationships. It is therefore recommended that universities capitalise on this medium and incorporate the three virtual communication strategies of Waters et al. (2009:102-106) in order to gauge the extent of their online stakeholder relationships.

One of the limitations of this study was that the study only analysed the Facebook pages of South African universities and universities of technology; it is therefore recommended that similar studies be conducted on universities in Africa. As this study also only focused on Facebook, it is recommended that future research in this area be expanded to include other types of social networking sites. Future studies can also analyse the content of the messages and feedback on Facebook, in order to assist organisations in understanding and managing their stakeholders' perceptions.

Finally, the study of Waters et al. (2009:102-106) on virtual communication strategies was used for this study, because it is one of the most cited studies in this regard. It is acknowledged that since the completion of this study, it is likely that an adequate Facebook communication strategy has moved beyond these strategies to accommodate its ever-changing interface and features. It is therefore recommended that future research in this area should attempt to include other and newer relevant theoretical models and virtual communication strategies found in the literature.

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