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EXPLORING NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS' COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND MESSAGE CONTENT

ABSTRACT

Currently, organisations must decide which communication channel to use due to changes in the media landscape. Communication occurs through various channels, such as television, radio, print, email, phone, social media, and messaging apps. Each channel has its own set of rules, conventions, and nuances, which influence how messages are interpreted and received. This study investigated ways in which non-profit organisations (NPOs) in South Africa communicate their corporate social responsibility efforts. A survey questionnaire was distributed to 245 employees of NPOs in South Africa's Gauteng province, and the data was analysed using SPSS software. The findings identified meetings as one of the most frequently employed approaches for internal communication. The study also found that NPOs preferred older or more established means of communication over newer media. More specifically, non-electronic media such as meetings and word-of-mouth were used more than electronic media such as emails or SMS messaging, whereas social media was used even less frequently. This study adds to the existing literature on corporate social responsibility communication by highlighting the types of messages and diverse communication channels used by South African NPOs.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, non-profit organisations, communication channels, message content, new media, traditional media, uses and gratifications theory

INTRODUCTION

Developments in the media landscape have resulted in organisations having to choose which channel to employ for their communication needs. Today communication is not limited to just one channel; rather, it takes place through various channels. The channels can be verbal, nonverbal, visual, or audio, and each channel has its own set of complexities and nuances. These channels drive

organisations to develop and employ strategies to enhance their communication. One example of such a strategy is selecting which forms of media to use, as the selection of communication channels has been associated with effective communication (McWilliams & Crompton 1997). However, there is consensus that choosing the right communication platform can prove difficult. Each channel has its own set of rules, conventions, and nuances, which can influence how messages are interpreted and received by the audience. In addition, different media channels have their strengths and weaknesses in delivering different types of communication messages.

Consequently, the audience reacts according to a set of perceptions, the content of the message, and individual preferences, all of which contribute to the rise to dominance of certain media (Aaker 2010). Some media (e.g., television, magazines, and the Internet) are used by many organisations within a single campaign because of the increase in media choices (Chang & Thorson 2004), as the influence they may have on the target audiences may differ. This points to the difficulty associated with choosing appropriate media. Organisations have understood the persuasive potential of various types of media in communicating messages (Dondolo 2014). The nature of each channel is such that its characteristics impact how it is used, and how messages are perceived and understood by different individuals in different situations. This is founded on insights from the uses and gratifications theory, which holds that people or organisations choose and employ various communication channels due to the gratifications derived from such media (Rubin 2002; Whiting & Williams 2013). Dondolo (2014) suggests that the uses and gratifications theory is one of the most influential and widely applied theories in media studies, used to analyse both traditional and new media. In this study, the theory played a crucial role in comprehending why certain communication channels are favoured by NPOs and how they use these channels for specific purposes.

Considering the above, it is necessary to have a comprehensive understanding of the available media channels among NPOS and their ability to select the most suitable for each specific communication objective. Historically, traditional modes of communication, such as face-to-face communication (Rensburg 1993) and telephones (Ihm & Kim 2021), were considered the main methods for disseminating information about an organisation's activities to its stakeholders, including NPOs. These methods proved effective in fostering stakeholder engagement and support (Suárez-Rico *et al*. 2019).

The media landscape can be divided into two categories, traditional and new. Traditional media include printed materials, such as newspapers, periodicals, and novels, in addition to broadcast media, such as radio and television. New media, on the other hand, includes digital platforms such as social media, websites, podcasts, and blogs. Each type of media has unique benefits and reaches distinct audiences, but both have transformed how people access and consume information in the modern digital era.

De Bens (2001) emphasises the importance of newspapers for promotional efforts, such as couponing and shop advertisements, as well as informational campaigns that provide detailed product information. Newspapers are a type of communication channel

that can reach broad and local audiences (Sridhar & Sriram 2015). The characteristics of newspapers are related to how the reader can control the material and select which articles or advertisements to interact with and which not to interact with. These characteristics are also seen to promote targeted messages, as communicators can communicate various messages with specific demographics to attract interest (Hanekom & Scriven 2002).

Television is a medium that uses a combination of visual and auditory signals as well as sophisticated graphic capabilities to effectively convey persuasive and compelling messages to its audience (Hanjani & Akhavan 2018). It allows advertisers to reach a large audience through visual and auditory means and it has a more substantial influence than other media (Ansari & Joloudar 2011). Television is a powerful tool that can be used to influence behaviour and shape public opinion (Mitreva *et al*. 2022). Its ability to reach a large audience makes it a popular choice for advertisers to promote their products and services (Ansari & Joloudar 2011).

Radio advertising is one of the media that has consistently proven to be among the most effective. Like television, organisations that use radio can target large audiences. The effectiveness of radio advertising is attributed to the repetition or frequency of messages (Ibrahim *et al*. 2020). It is also an effective tool for creating awareness (Saikia 2017) and promoting products or services without requiring a high level of engagement from the audience. It has been observed that NPOs prefer conventional modes of communication to new ones (Suh 2022).

A significant milestone in communication is the move from traditional to new media. Technology has advanced rapidly in recent years and has made its presence felt in many sectors, including the communication sector. This impact has been positive as many industries have welcomed the introduction of new forms of media channels such as social media, online news portals, and streaming services. Arif Dar *et al*. (2014) suggest that communicators explore new ways to reach their target audience through online platforms. The introduction of these new media has allowed organisations to reach a wider audience and communicate messages more effectively. This is captured by Rogers' diffusion of innovations theory. This theory explains why communicators may exhibit a preference for utilising new communication channels, such as social media, over older electronic media (Kaminski 2011; Robinson 2009; Sahin 2006). The diffusion of innovations theory is considered significant in this study to understand how digital communication channels have attracted recent interest among NPOs (Suárez-Rico *et al*. 2019; Milde & Yawson 2017; Waters *et al*. 2009). Waters *et al*. (2009) report that social media has emerged as the most frequently utilised message dissemination channel, accounting for 74% of organisations' communication strategies. Waters *et al*. (2009) found that 20% of non-profit Facebook messages include campaign descriptions, 13% include volunteer and donation opportunities, and 5% share media releases. Therefore, diffusion of innovations can facilitate comprehension of people's decisions to use new forms of communication over traditional ones. These perceptions play a significant role in why organisations prefer new media to reach a larger audience (Lindstädt & Budzinski 2011). When a large variety of media channels are accessible, the audience will rely on the characteristics of those channels, such as how interactive

they are and how much they engage them. New media has given stakeholders more control over their media experiences, allowing them to customise their interactions with various organisations (Wang 2006). New media are of interest to organisations and can play a key role as a communication vehicle for most organisations as they offer diverse information and a platform for communicating and interconnecting with a wider target audience.

Although research has been conducted in this area, which provided valuable insights into which channels organisations prefer, limited research has been done on communication channels that NPOs prefer to use when interacting with their stakeholders. As a result, there is little published work that directly covers the communication channels used by NPOs in South Africa. Previous studies offer only limited insight into the modes of communication used by various NPOs (Wiggill *et al*. 2009), with some studies highlighting specific media types (Swart *et al*. 2021) or specific categories of NPOs (Dlamini 2016; Kilonda 2013). Despite their divergent conclusions, all these studies emphasise the need for continuous empirical research on communication channels to keep up with advancements in the field. Choosing the appropriate media form and vehicle is crucial for NPOs in South Africa as it can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the message being communicated. Using the previously identified literature, the present study surveyed participants working in NPOs in South Africa's Gauteng province.

METHODS

Participants

The study involved 245 participants employed at NPOs. The sample of participating institutions was randomly drawn from the list of public institutions listed in the 2015 PFMA Schedule 3A list of Public Institutions as National Public Entities, where PFMA refers to the Public Finance Management Act No. 1 of 1999 (National Treasury 2015).

Survey instrument

This study used the existing literature on NPOs and corporate communication to develop a survey instrument for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication in NPOs. The survey consisted of various sections, with the first section focusing on demographic information about the organisations' backgrounds. The second section delved into the types and frequencies of communication channels used by internal stakeholders. The participants were requested to rate their use of communication channels, including electronic mail, notice boards, newsletters, and social media, on a 3-point rating scale. Similarly, the third section of the survey focused on communication channels for external stakeholders, with the participants again using a 3-point rating scale to rate their usage of different communication channels. Finally, the participants were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with various communication message content statements using a 5-point Likert-type scale.

Data analysis

This study examined the modes of communication and the content of communication messages used by NPOs in South Africa. The study utilised SPSS software to analyse and determine the descriptive characteristics of the collected data.

Demographics of the sample

This section contains two sub-sections that detail the demographic characteristics of the sample. Firstly, it presents the participants' main business activities, and secondly, it presents the size of the organisations that participated in the study.

TABLE 1:   PARTICIPANT'S MAIN BUSINESS ACTIVITY

Participant's main business activity	N	Percentage
Children day and aftercare, welfare, protection services, feeding, empowerment	57	23.3%
Community-based actions, development programmes	34	14%
Home-based care services, homeless shelters	20	8.2%
Disabilities	21	8.6%
Elderly	16	6.6%
HIV/AIDS and other chronic illness	12	5.0%
Education	11	4.5%
Healthcare services, patient healthcare	11	4.5%
Charity	8	3.3%
Religious/church services	6	2.4%
Arts/creativity	6	2.4%
Drug and substance abuse prevention	5	2.0%
Youth development programmes	5	2.0%
Trauma victim centre, management, counselling	5	2.0%
Gender-based violence prevention	5	2.0%
Animal cruelty prevention	5	2.0%
Family welfare/teenage pregnancy	3	1.2%
Autism	3	1.2%
Soup kitchen/catering	3	1.2%
Legal services	2	0.8%

Participant's main business activity	N	Percentage
Blind/visually impaired	2	0.8%
Environmental issues	2	0.8%
Events	1	0.4%
Alzheimer's disease	1	0.4%
Men's forum/counselling	1	0.4%
Total	245	100%

The largest group of participating NPOs (23.3%) engaged in children's day and aftercare services, welfare, protection services, feeding, and empowerment. The second most common business activity was community-based actions and development programmes (14%). Approximately 8.6% of the participants focused on disabilities, 8.2% on home-based care services and homeless shelters, and 6.6% on elderly and old age care.

Other significant business activities reported by participants included HIV/AIDS and other chronic illness services (5%); healthcare services such as patient healthcare and welfare (4.5%); education (4.5%); charity (3.3%); religious/church services (2.4%); arts and creativity (2.4%); drug and substance abuse prevention (2%); trauma victim centre management and counselling (2%); and youth development programmes (2%).

In addition, a minority of participants were involved in gender-based violence prevention (2%), animal cruelty prevention (2%), and family welfare with a focus on children and teenage pregnancy (1.2%). A few of the participants reported engagement in soup kitchen/catering (1.2%), autism-related services (1.2%), legal services (0.8%), environmental issues (0.8%), the blind (0.8%), men's forum and counselling (0.4%), Alzheimer's services (0.4%), and events (0.4%).

The size of respondents' organisations

Table 2 shows that almost half (47%) of the organisations involved had ten or fewer employees, while 23.7% had between 11 and 20 employees. Only two NPOs had more than 1000 employees.

TABLE 2:   THE SIZE OF RESPONDENTS' ORGANISATIONS

Number of employees	N	Percentage
0 to 10	115	47.0 %
11 to 20	58	23.7%
21 to 50	40	16.3%
50 to 100	14	5.0%

Number of employees	N	Percentage
101 to 200	8	3.3%
201 to 1000	5	2.0%
More than 1000	2	0.8%
Unspecified number	3	1.2%
Total:	245	100%

RESULTS

Based on the descriptive analyses of the responses dealing with the different types of communication channels and the characteristics of the message contents that were used by the participating NPOs, the following results were obtained. Table 3 describes the types of communication channels used for internal stakeholders.

TABLE 3:   COMMUNICATION CHANNELS USED BY INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

Description	Not at all: N (%)	To a small extent: N (%)	To a large extent: N (%)
Meetings	6 (2.4%)	24 (9.8%)	215 (87.8%)
Word-of-mouth	6 (2.4%)	27 (11%)	212 (86.5%)
SMS text messages	41 (16.7%)	52 (21.3%)	152 (62%)
Emails	49 (20.0%)	20 (8.2%)	176 (71.8%)
Posters	50 (20.4)	50 (20.4%)	145 (59.2%)
Company reports/documents	58 (23.7%)	66 (26.9%)	121 (49.4%)
Notice board	68 (27.8%)	36 (14.7%)	141 (57.5%)
Social media	93 (38.0%)	35 (14.2%)	117 (47.8%)
Company website	152 (62.0%)	36 (14.7%)	57 (23.3%)
Suggestion boxes	155 (63.3%)	40 (16.3%)	50 (20.4%)
Other	173 (70.6%)	20 (8.2%)	52 (21.2%)

For ease of interpretation, various communication channels are presented in descending order of use in Table 3. Meetings and word-of-mouth were identified as the two most used methods of internal communication with internal stakeholders. Almost all the respondents (97.6%) reported that their organisations utilised meetings and word-of-mouth to communicate community-related initiatives to their staff. Conversely,

company websites were employed less frequently (e.g., 62.0% of the respondents stated that websites were not used at all for this type of communication), while 47% of the respondents said they mostly received information about community-related initiatives through social media. These findings suggest that companies may need to reconsider their digital communication practices and explore alternative channels to engage with internal stakeholder groups.

Regarding email, the survey results indicated their effectiveness for most respondents, with 71.8% stating that their organisations used this communication method to a large extent when disseminating information about community-related initiatives to their staff. However, it is important to note that 20% of the respondents indicated that their organisations did not use email for this purpose. This suggests that email may not be suitable for all internal stakeholders. The results suggest that NPOs in South Africa rely heavily on conventional modes of communication, such as meetings, word-of-mouth, and email for internal communication with their stakeholders.

In terms of external stakeholders, the data analysis revealed the following types and frequencies of communication channels used:

TABLE 4:   COMMUNICATION CHANNELS USED FOR EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

Description	Not at all N (%)	To a small extent N (%)	To a large extent N (%)
Word-of-mouth	4 (1.6%)	17 (7.0%)	224 (91.4%)
Company reports/documents	27 (11.0%)	54 (22.0%)	164 (67.0%)
Educational programmes	32 (13.1%)	40 (16.3%)	173 (70.6%)
Corporate social responsibility activities (e.g., partnerships, sponsorships, and donations) are used to mobilise resources and create awareness	36 (14.7%)	40 (16.3%)	169 (69.0%)
Discussion forums	37 (15.1%)	46 (18.8%)	162 (66.1%)
Workshops	46 (18.8%)	43 (17.5%)	156 (63.7%)
Social media	77 (31.4%)	38 (15.5%)	130 (53.1%)
Traditional media coverage	108 (44.1)	60 (24.5%)	77 (31.4)
Advertising	119 (48.6)	45 (18.4)	81 (33)
Conferences	153 (62.4)	58 (23.7)	34 (13.9)
Company website	130 (53.1)	42 (17.1)	73 (29.8)
Other	191 (78)	16 (6.5)	38 (15.5)

In Table 4 above, the various communication channels directed at external stakeholders are presented in descending order of their frequency and percentage of use. The Table shows that 98.4% of the participating companies used word-of-mouth to communicate with external stakeholders about community-related initiatives. The next three most used modes of communication employed by organisations to engage with their external stakeholders were company reports/documents, educational programmes, and CSR activities. A high percentage of the respondents (70.6%) reported that their communication efforts were largely focused on educational initiatives, while approximately 69% of their external communication efforts were largely concerned with CSR activities. Other communication modes, such as websites, social media, traditional media coverage, and advertising, were used less frequently for engaging with external stakeholders.

Communication message content

At a later stage of the research, the researchers asked the respondents what kind of information was included in the communication between the NPOs and external stakeholders. The findings are presented below.

TABLE 5:   EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS WHO RECEIVE COMMUNITY-RELATED ACTIVITY COMMUNICATION

Description	Totally disagree N (%)	Slightly disagree N (%)	Not sure N (%)	Slightly agree N (%)	Totally agree N (%)
The company's community-related communication usually contains content that:					
Illustrates the organisation's commitment to community well-being.	0 (0%)	1 (0.4%)	6 (2.4%)	19 (7.8%)	219(89.4%)
Describes the societal impacts of the company's community-related activities.	2 (0.8%)	1 (0.4%)	12 (4.9%)	25 10.2%)	205(83.7%)
Is aligned with the company's main business activity.	0 (0%)	1 (0.4%)	5 (2%)	17 (6.9%)	222(90.6%)
Usually consists of information provision to stakeholders without asking for any feedback/response.	66 (27%)	55(22.4%)	47(19.2%)	35(14.3%)	42(17.1%)

Description	Totally disagree N (%)	Slightly disagree N (%)	Not sure N (%)	Slightly agree N (%)	Totally agree N (%)
Provides information but also gives stakeholders opportunities to respond.	2 (0.8%)	4 (1.6%)	12 (4.9%)	28(11.4%)	199(81.2%)
Usually attempts to actively involve stakeholders in the company's community-related activities.	2 (0.8%)	1 (0.4%)	9 (3.7%)	29(11.8%)	204(83.3%)

Table 5 above presents the participants' opinions regarding their organisation's communication on community-related activities. Based on the results, most respondents totally agreed that the company's community-related communication contained content that demonstrated the organisation's commitment to community well-being (89.4%) and that their communication typically included content aligned with the company's primary business activity (90.6%). There was also high consensus regarding the societal impact of the company's community-related activities, as 83.7% totally agree that communication usually encompasses content describing this impact. Regarding how the company engaged with stakeholders, there was a clear preference for communication that provided information while offering stakeholders opportunities to respond (81.2% totally agree) and be actively involved in the company's community-related activities (83.3% totally agree).

The results suggest that most of the respondents believed that their company had a clear and concise communication message about community-related activities. Furthermore, the results indicated that most participants felt that their company's communication messages effectively promoted community-related activities. However, a small percentage of respondents believed that their company's communication message was not sufficiently relevant or informative. These findings suggest that NPOs in South Africa are actively communicating their community-related activities to external stakeholders, and they are focused on illustrating their commitment to community well-being and describing the societal impacts of their activities. Organisations are also open to receiving feedback and involving stakeholders in community-related activities.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the modes of communication and content of communication messages used by non-profit organisations in South Africa. The findings revealed that meetings were one of the most frequently employed approaches for internal communication, as this communication channel was utilised by 97.6% of the participating NPOs. This preference can likely be attributed to the size and types of NPOs involved in the study. However, regardless of their size, many NPOs seemed

to prefer meetings. These findings support the conclusion of Armstrong and Butcher (2018) that small NGOs predominantly favour traditional communication methods, with meetings being a popular channel (Suh 2022).

The research findings further suggest that word-of-mouth communication was used by almost all NPOs for both internal communication to staff (97.6%) and external communication to stakeholders (98.4%). The outcomes provide insight into how organisations could leverage word-of-mouth to enhance internal and external communication channels. The findings are in line with the results of the uses and gratification theory research of Guo *et al*. (2008) into the motivations behind computer-mediated communication and non-computer-mediated communication, where it was found that face-to-face communication was appropriate for contributing to several of the underlying motivations to communicate.

The findings of this study are comparable to those of Sundermann (2018), who highlighted that effective word-of-mouth communication depends on meaningful connections between the message sender and the message recipient. Therefore, organisations should continue to use word-of-mouth to improve their internal and external communication. Furthermore, the current study demonstrates that NPOs engaged in preferred older/established communication means over newer media. More specifically, non-electronic media such as meetings and word-of-mouth were used more than electronic media such as emails or SMS messaging, whereas social media was used even less frequently. This result was anticipated and aligns well with that of prior research. For certain NPOs, a lack of resources may limit ICT usage (Ihm & Kim 2021). Nevertheless, when technological tools such as social media are accessible, these organisations can use them for the external promotion of campaigns to reach a vast audience and for internal targeting of volunteers for effective engagement (Ihm & Kim 2021). These findings correspond with research showing how limited communication occurs on social media platforms (Maxwell & Carboni 2014), suggesting more one-sided communication than two-way conversations. Thus, traditional marketing techniques might be more suitable for disseminating messages effectively among NPOs. Such results further confirm how NPOs usually adopt a two-way communication approach to their target demographics, consistent with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) symmetric public relations communication model.

The findings further revealed that 70.6% of the respondents indicated that their organisation prioritised educational initiatives to a significant extent in their external communication. This suggests that participating NPOs place a high value on educating their audience about their products, services, or broader issues related to their industry. It also implies that they see communication as a means to inform and empower audiences, not just to promote corporate self-interest.

The present study found that 48.6 % of the respondents did not use advertising campaigns in their organisations' external communication. This finding substantiates the assertion by Pope *et al*. (2009) that NPOs frequently encounter challenges in marketing due to their limited experience. Furthermore, the authors (*ibid*.) emphasise the critical role of marketing in all facets of NPO management.

Although this study did not assess for significance in constructs, more than 89% of the survey respondents felt that their company's community-related communication usually contained content that illustrated their commitment to community well-being. This should be noted as an encouraging sign that NPOs want to do more regarding their message content. This implies that NPOs should incorporate content aligned with their primary activities into their communication. Furthermore, nearly 91% confirmed that their company's communications often mentioned how its core activities directly led to their guiding principles or mission statement – a key factor that should be considered when crafting messaging strategies.

Overall, the results of this study demonstrated how NPOs mostly rely on traditional media and less on new media for communication, it advanced the theoretical understanding of why NPOs use old-to-new media, and it provided future directions to investigate this phenomenon. The results suggested that for NPOs trying to improve communication with internal stakeholders, two-way communication practices in the form of meetings may be more effective. This could allow these organisations to better understand how stakeholders perceive the organisations' initiatives and the stakeholders' concerns. For external stakeholders, NPOs predominantly use word-of-mouth communication. This finding is reinforced by Sundermann's study (2018), which found that many organisations use this channel to cultivate closer donor relationships.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The results presented in the current investigation contribute to the existing body of research and further confirm the significant role of NPOs in utilising traditional media as a communication tool. These findings underscore the relevance of meetings and word-of-mouth communication in the domain of CSR communication, aligning with prior studies conducted by Hou and Lampes (2015), Armstrong and Butcher (2018), Sundermann (2018), and Suh (2022). While the current study relied solely on descriptive analysis and focused on frequency data, without delving into causality, this deliberate methodological choice addressed the study's specific objectives. Despite this inherent limitation, the present investigation reinforces earlier research findings by providing additional evidence of NPOs' continued reliance on traditional media channels for CSR communication efforts.

The objective of this research was neither to establish a conceptual model of the factors impacting communication in NPOs using the uses and gratifications or diffusion of innovation theories, nor to demonstrate the link between the constructs of these theories. Rather, the purpose of this investigation was to explore the communication channels employed by South African NPOs. Consequently, researchers are urged to be cautious when interpreting and generalising these findings. This limitation presents an opportunity for future research to explore the multifaceted factors influencing CSR communication in NPOs and to investigate such relationships.

This exploration holds significant value for academics and professionals as it could lead to the development of refined conceptual frameworks and provide deeper insights into this understudied phenomenon.

The study was limited mostly to small NPOs within the Gauteng province. While the findings are promising, future research should include NPOs from other provinces across South Africa. In addition, future research might investigate other NPOs involved in business activities other than those in this study. Thus, wider coverage will allow a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, and assist in enhancing the generalisability of future findings.

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