The Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management
ISSN: (Online) 2071-3185, (Print) 2522-7343

Strategies utilised by communication agencies to build and maintain relationships with clients

Authors:
Lucinda B. Sutton[1]
Elizabeth M. Kloppers[1]
Louise Bezuidenhout[1]

Affiliations:
[1]School of Communication, Faculty of Humanities, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Lucinda Sutton,
lucinda.sutton@nwu.ac.za

Dates:
Received: 05 Oct. 2023
Accepted: 30 Jan. 2024
Published: 14 Mar. 2024

How to cite this article:
Sutton, L.B., Kloppers, E.M. & Bezuidenhout, L., 2024, 'Strategies utilised by communication agencies to build and maintain relationships with clients', *Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management* 16(1), a825. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajesbm.v16i1.825

Background: Apart from the turbulent South African economic environment, small communication agencies operate in a highly competitive context. Agencies operate in a highly competitive context. Stakeholder relationship management theory argues that organisations should use specific strategies to build and maintain long-term relationships with stakeholders, such as clients, to contribute to the sustainability of the organisation.

Aim: The aim was to determine how communication agencies utilise strategies to facilitate long-term relationships with their clients to survive in a competitive and turbulent South African business environment.

Setting: The study focused on five communication agencies in Potchefstroom, South Africa as a multiple case study design.

Methods: Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven senior managers and nine account managers representing the communication agencies.

Results: The communication agencies used almost all the strategies indicated in the stakeholder relationship management theory and added the strategies of availability and understanding to build and maintain relationships with clients.

Conclusion: The communication agencies utilised strategies to maintain long-term relationships with clients in a competitive and unstable context. The study addresses the call for case study research in relationship management on the African continent, qualitative research in the field and research on strategies to build relationships between organisations and stakeholders.

Contribution: This is the first South African study exploring communication agencies' approach to utilise strategies to manage relationships with clients through the lens of stakeholder relationship management theory. Small organisations and agencies in other sectors can take cognisance of the strategies these agencies employ and adapt the proposed conceptual framework to be appropriate in their specific sectors.

Keywords: account managers; clients; communication agency; stakeholder relationship management; strategies; two-way communication.

Introduction and background

South Africa remains one of the countries with the highest unemployment rate in the world, constituting unemployment to be declared a national emergency by the South African government (Samanga 2019; United Nations 2015). In 2023, Statistics South Africa indicated that the unemployment rate was 32.9%. When taking qualifications into account, a startling 7.5% of the unemployed hold tertiary qualifications, while 2.7% of unemployed persons are university graduates (Statistics South Africa 2023). Goyayi (2022) explains these numbers in practical terms: 'roughly 250 000 fresh graduates enter South African labour each year, of which approximately only 30% of the graduates find employment'.

It seems that even those with tertiary education and university degrees face an uphill battle in finding employment in South Africa. Therefore, many graduates turn to entrepreneurship and start their own businesses to alleviate unemployment (Adonis 2022). These start-ups often grow, making a significant impact on unemployment and the economy, by including more graduates in the labour force in their industries (Chetty, Beharry-Ramraj & Gurayah 2022). This also holds true for graduates of communication-related qualifications, who can, for example, start their own communication agencies. Communication agencies can include advertising agencies, media agencies, communication consulting agencies, and agencies specialising in a communication discipline (press relations, public relations, events, sponsorship, patronage, digital communication, graphic design and branding, etc.) (WeAreCom 2022).

The agency space has always been fiercely competitive, and it seems that now, more than ever before, competition has heightened among these agencies (Garcia 2020). A global report released by Wix (2020) on the digital communication agency industry found that an overwhelming 50% of communication agencies agreed that increasing competition is one of their main challenges. It is, therefore, vital that communication agencies, like any other organisation, obtain a competitive edge in the market to survive among their competitors.

Furthermore, online and digital presence led to the rapid globalisation of this industry (Zerfass et al. 2023), with additional competitors added to the industry such as social media influencers (Enke & Borchers 2019) and technologies for automated content production (Smith & Waddington 2023). However, it is predicted that the appeal of globally offered services will decline, expediting the resurgence of local communication agencies (Anderson, Rainie & Vogels 2021). More businesses would prefer to work with agencies closer to home, especially in the aftermath of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). This time of uncertainty has led to a sense of insecurity, driving businesses to seek solace in the familiar (Mulcahy 2020). For communication agencies, it is wise to expend their energies on fostering strong relationships with these local businesses to create a dependable client base.

In the developing South African milieu, agencies are not only faced with competition but are also fighting to simply survive in the declining economic conditions, which are characterised by the volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous South African context, known as the VUCA business environment (Sutton, Le Roux & Fourie 2022; Wright & Wigmore 2023). Small enterprises experience high failure rates because of South African challenges, including crime, corruption, inaccessible markets and unsupportive tax legislation (Mhlongo & Daya 2023; Van Wyk 2023).

When one considers the highly competitive context and the VUCA business environment, it is clear that all start-ups, such as small communication agencies need to manage and maintain strong relationships with their clients for their survival (Chen & Lee 2022; Ciambotti et al. 2021). The focus is not only on monetary survival but also on the value that these relationships can add as an intangible asset to such an agency's existence through client loyalty (Mubarik, Chandran & Devadason 2016; Pressgrove & McKeever 2016).

Several studies link the utilisation of relationship strategies to long-term relationships with external stakeholders, such as clients (e.g. Briones et al. 2011; Harrison 2023; Park & Reber 2008). Furthermore, research shows that building and maintaining long-term relationships with these stakeholders is crucial in gaining a competitive advantage that contributes to the survival and sustainability of organisations, like small communication agencies (Buttle & Maklan 2019; Goodwin 2003; Grunig & Huang 2000; Kim, Yin & Lee 2020; Rajhans 2018; Valackiene 2010). Based on this, we argue that communication agencies should employ well-managed strategies to create and maintain long-term relationships with their clients in order to survive.

Based on these arguments, our study was guided by the following research question: *How do communication agencies utilise strategies to facilitate long-term relationships with their clients to survive in a competitive and turbulent South African business environment?*

To answer this question, our study aims to report on the strategies used by small communication agencies in Potchefstroom to manage relationships with their clients. The relationship management strategies are analysed from a stakeholder relationship perspective within a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with senior management and account managers at the agencies.

The research adds to the body of knowledge on stakeholder relationship management theory to address the gap in research on relationship cultivation strategies. Ki, Ertem-Eray and Hayden (2023:6) recently called for more research on strategies that can result in long-term relationships, seeing that this topic in relationship management is 'still underexplored'. Similarly, Harrison (2023:255) called for future work to include qualitative methods to 'look more deeply' and to understand strategies for relationship-building in different contexts 'in our world today'. This study makes a contribution by presenting two new strategies, in addition to the seminal relationship-building strategies of Hon and Grunig (1999), for small communication agencies and start-ups to manage relationships with clients in a unique and unstable environment. On a practical level, these strategies could cultivate long-term relationships with clients, which could ultimately ensure economic sustainability for these agencies. We argue that small organisations in other contexts aiming to facilitate long-term relationships with their clients can take cognisance of these strategies and see how they can be adapted and applied to be relevant for their sectors and contexts.

Research on agencies' relationship management with clients

There is no shortage of research on relationship management from a communication management and public relations perspective. From the year 2000 onwards, the topic has become one of the most researched areas in corporate communication management and public relations, and continues to grow in popularity (Ki et al. 2023). The growth of relationship management research demonstrates the value of relationships for organisations and for the industry (Cheng 2018).

Recently, scholars tended to focus on relationship management within certain themes such as international public relations (e.g. Labarca & Ampuero Ruiz 2021; Labarca, Arceneaux & Golan 2020); culture, diversity and change (e.g. Daboun, Md Yusof & Khoso 2023; Ni, Dai & Liu 2022); donor or volunteer retention in the non-profit and non-government sector (e.g. Iannacone 2021; Pressgrove et al. 2022); internal relationship management (e.g. Lee & Kim 2021; Shen & Jiang 2021); relationship management via online, digital and social channels (e.g. Lee & Kim 2020; Men et al. 2023; Tong 2022) and managing relationships with stakeholders during a crisis (e.g. Babatunde 2022; Steenkamp & Dhanesh 2023; Wang, Huang & Cai 2022).

From a local South African perspective, less research was published on stakeholder relationship management. A tendency to focus on relationship management with various stakeholders in the non-profit and non-government environment (e.g. Meyer & Barker 2020; Wiggill 2017), the mining and construction sectors (e.g. Greeff 2013; Holtzhausen, Fourie & Naudè 2008) and the higher education sector (e.g. Dyll & Tomaselli 2016; Holtzhausen & Fourie 2013) is evident. A few scholars placed emphasis on the use of channels, technology and online media such as social media to manage relationships (e.g. Mambadja, Conradie & Van der Waldt 2015).

Research done in the agencies and consulting sphere is internationally mostly done from a marketing and business management perspective (e.g. Mubarik et al. 2016; Udayana et al. 2021; Zou et al. 2014). Limited studies have been done in Spain (Estanyol 2012) and Denmark (Johansen 2017) from a stakeholder relationship perspective where the focus is on agencies' and consultants' relationship management with stakeholders. However, no South African studies could be found that include a communication agency or consultant perspective on managing relationships with their clients by utilising relationship cultivating strategies.

Previous studies investigated strategies to build and maintain relationships with various stakeholders in different environments and built on Hon and Grunig's (1999) seminal work. Waters et al. (2009) developed virtual strategies, namely disclosure, information dissemination and involvement to cultivate and maintain relationships in the online and digital environment. Waters (2009) also added stewardship as a strategy in fundraising relationships, while Slabbert (2012) contributed with a stakeholder–relationship framework for building organisation–stakeholder partnerships. These studies, however, do not necessarily specify what strategies help small communication agencies to maintain long-term relationships with clients in a struggling South African economy and a fiercely competitive environment. Nor do they specify how to modify their application of the strategies to suit the local South African environment, as it is unclear whether the Western perspective is relevant to our complex context for managing stakeholder relationships. Mersham, Skinner and Rensburg (2011) argued that American and European relationship management theories are not always applicable to African contexts. Furthermore, Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman (2023) observed that case studies are not frequently used in relationship management research by African scholars, and Harrison (2023) called for more qualitative research in the field to have a deeper understanding of relationship strategies in various contexts. Additionally, Ki, Pasadeos and Ertem-Eray (2019) noted that little research has been done on strategies to build the relationship between organisations and stakeholders.

Our chosen multiple case study design of small communication agencies, headed by communication graduates who manage relationships with clients in the competitive and VUCA South African context responds to the lack of case study research and was deliberately chosen to contribute to the relationship management literature in the non-Western context. Our study also fills the above-mentioned gap in research by exploring communication agencies' utilisation of strategies to manage relationships with clients through the lens of stakeholder relationship management theory, by employing a qualitative research approach to data collection and analysis.

Theoretical points of departure: Stakeholder relationship management theory

The stakeholder relationship management theory assumes that the organisation should develop and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders, managed through two-way communication, for an organisation to survive and prosper (Ledingham & Bruning 2001). Therefore, strategically managed two-way communication should contribute to building and maintaining long-term relationships with clients, leading to client retention and creating a competitive advantage (Harrison 2023) over other communication agencies. Furthermore, long-term relationships with clients should also contribute to reaching organisational goals, leading to survival and sustainability (Men et al. 2023). From this premise, we decided to use Hon and Grunig's (1999) seminal work on stakeholder relationship management as a theoretical framework for relationship management through two-way communication. Hon and Grunig (1999) did an extensive review of the literature on relationship management and introduced relationship strategies, relationship dimensions (or outcomes) and two relationship types.

Hon and Grunig (1999), Grunig and Huang (2000) and Grunig (2002) established two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical **strategies** for how relationships should be managed, which are as follows:

- Access: Stakeholders are provided access to information and access to organisational decision-making processes.
- Openness or disclosure: The organisation and stakeholders are open to sharing ideas, disclosing important information transparently and honestly and are willing to engage in direct discussions with each other.

- Positivity: The organisation does whatever is necessary to make stakeholders feel content in the relationship and positive about the association.
- Assurances of legitimacy: The organisation and stakeholders make an effort to express the legitimacy of the other party and their concerns, and commit to maintaining the relationship.
- Sharing of tasks: Both parties share tasks to solve problems that concern the other party or that are in the interests of the organisation, the stakeholders or both.
- Networking: The organisation builds relationships, networks or coalitions with those whom its stakeholders have connections with.
- Cooperating: Both the organisation and stakeholders work together and cooperate to build a mutually beneficial relationship.
- Being unconditionally constructive: The organisation is willing to do whatever it considers best for the relationship with stakeholders, even if it has to give up some of its position.
- Stipulating win-win or no deal: If the organisation and stakeholder cannot find a solution that benefits both parties, they agree to make no deal, rather than to proceed with a decision that is not beneficial for both.
- Keeping promises: Both parties do what they promised to do, which leads to some of the dimensions of trust (dependability and competence).
- Dual concern: Balancing the interests of the organisation with the interests of stakeholders. In some instances, the dual concern strategies are asymmetrical because they emphasise the organisation's interest over the stakeholder or vice versa. These asymmetrical strategies will not be effective in managing long-term relationships and should be avoided. They include contending, avoiding, accommodating, compromising and distributing.

Mills and Clark (1994) and Hon and Grunig (1999) developed two major types of relationships, namely communal and exchange relationships. In a communal relationship, both parties give benefits to please the other and because they genuinely care about the well-being of the other party, without expecting anything in return (Grunig 2002; Hung 2007). In an exchange relationship, one party gives benefits to the other party in response to the party having provided benefits in the past or in anticipation of them doing so in the future (Grunig 2002; Hung 2007).

Hon and Grunig (1999) further identified four **outcomes** or indicators for measuring the quality of relationships with stakeholders, which are as follows:

- Control mutuality: The extent to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another. Mutual control thus refers to power-sharing in a relationship, where all parties have some say in situations that affect them.
- Trust: The level of confidence and willingness of both parties to open themselves to each other. Trust can be achieved through a combination of three dimensions, namely integrity, dependability and competence.
- Commitment: The degree to which both parties believe and feel that the relationship is worth spending energy and effort to maintain and promote.
- Satisfaction: The degree to which both parties feel favourable towards the other in the relationship as a result of reinforcing positive expectations about the relationship.

These guiding principles provide the basis on which communication agencies should manage and maintain relationships with clients, by employing a two-way approach to communication, to ensure that they have an advantage in a competitive and challenging environment. It is the starting point on which the study is based and presents a broad theoretical framework within which the research was undertaken.

Research methods and design

This study employed a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis because we wanted to gain in-depth insight and an understanding of communication agencies' perspectives, reasons, considerations and experiences (see Babbie & Mouton 2001; Du Plooy 2009) of how they manage and maintain relationships with clients. The qualitative research approach is about uncovering truth in the data in a way that is authentic, not about generalisability or validity of the data (Lindlof & Taylor 2019). This does not make our findings any less valuable or important to the study of strategies to build and maintain relationships, but it aims to understand the specific data in question and not to generalise (Lindlof & Taylor 2019).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method because these kinds of interviews are structured enough to provide comparison and integration of the findings of different interviews, while being flexible enough to allow the researchers to ask additional follow-up questions and include themes in the interviews that were not provided in advance (Du Plooy 2009). Hocking, Stack and Mcdermott (2003) note that interviews as a qualitative research method help researchers to understand the phenomenon of communication in an organisation, such as the communication agencies' approach to relationship management with external stakeholders.

A multiple case study design was adopted which involves the intensive investigation and in-depth analysis of single systems (Du Plooy 2009). This design is flexible and responsive to the demands and circumstances of a research question (Babbie & Mouton 2001), specifically to acquire knowledge to answer the research question posed in this study: *How do communication agencies utilise strategies to facilitate long-term relationships with their clients to survive* *in a competitive and turbulent South African business environment?*

The subject of the study was demarcated by focusing on the city of Potchefstroom (North-West province, South Africa). This is a medium-sized town with five known communication agencies who compete for clients. The five agencies were established before the COVID-19 pandemic and survived through the pandemic. All five communication agencies were selected as units of analysis (whole population), which were started and headed by previous North-West University communication graduates. These were relatively small agencies with less than 10 employees working in each agency as account managers, content creators and/or graphic designers. Most of the employees are also communication graduates from the same institution.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven senior managers (directors or CEOs of the company) and nine account managers at the communication agencies (see Table 1). These 16 participants were purposively selected as a known-group sample (see Du Plooy 2009), as we wanted to investigate the perception of senior managers who understand the agencies' stakeholder relations practices and strategies, and also the account managers' perception as those who work directly with the clients and manage relationships with them daily. These individuals had the information needed and were therefore purposively selected as participants (Patton 2015). This qualitative study used the repetition of information (data saturation point), as the guideline for the number of interviews conducted (Lindlof & Taylor 2019; Moser & Korstjens 2018); therefore, data collection was ended with 16 interviews of participants all fitting the above description. In this way, the semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the perception of senior management and account managers at five communication agencies in Potchefstroom on their approach to managing and maintaining relationships with their clients, in order to identify strategies they utilised to maintain these relationships in a highly competitive context and in the turbulent South African economic environment.

TABLE 1: Overview of participants.

Communication agency	Participant	Pseudonym
Agency A	Senior manager 1	Participant 1
	Account manager 1	Participant 2
	Account manager 2	Participant 3
Agency B	Senior manager 1	Participant 4
	Senior manager 2	Participant 5
	Account manager 1	Participant 6
	Account manager 2	Participant 7
	Account manager 3	Participant 8
Agency C	Senior manager 1	Participant 9
	Senior manager 2	Participant 10
	Account manager 1	Participant 11
	Account manager 2	Participant 12
Agency D	Senior manager 1	Participant 13
	Account manager 1	Participant 14
Agency E	Senior manager 1	Participant 15
	Account manager 1	Participant 16

Invitations to participate in the interviews had been e-mailed to all senior managers of the agencies, of whom all seven made themselves available. They also arranged with the account managers working at their agencies to avail themselves for the interviews. Fieldworkers conducted the interviews face-to-face on a scheduled date and time and at a location convenient for the participants. The aim and purpose of the research were explained to participants upfront, and their formal informed consent was obtained before the interviews commenced. All participants signed the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee informed consent form. Participation was voluntary, and both the agencies' and participants' privacy were respected by de-identifying and anonymising the data.

The interviews were guided by interview schedules, based largely on Grunig and Hon's (1999) standardised qualitative instrument for measuring relationships, which has been tested locally and internationally several times. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 min, was recorded and transcribed verbatim by the fieldworkers. The transcripts were analysed by the three authors of the study using qualitative thematic content analysis (see Lindlof & Taylor 2019; Weber 1990). Initially, the data were analysed deductively and organised into pre-coded categories to incorporate as much related data as possible, based on the same theoretical framework (Du Plooy 2009; Moser & Korstjens 2018) that guided the development of the measuring instrument, namely Hon and Grunig's (1999) relationship strategies. Thereafter, the data were inductively analysed 'to let the data speak' and two post-coded categories emerged (Du Plooy 2009:226). These two categories were the additional strategies we identified from the case studies and present as other strategies needed in the specific context to build and maintain relationships. The authors discussed the interpretation of the findings with each other and compared the inductively identified themes (post-coded categories) in an effort to improve the validity of the qualitative approach (Wolcott 2001). The findings below describe how participants spoke about their strategies to build and maintain long-term relationship with their clients, and these findings are compared to existing theory.

Results and discussion

The focus of this study is to evaluate the strategies that agencies apply to build and maintain relationships, and therefore the relationship management strategies (as discussed in the theory on stakeholder management) were used in the evaluation. The presentation of the research findings herein reflects the viewpoints and experiences of the senior managers and account managers at the communication agencies on these strategies. Many of them identified the same stakeholder relationship strategies and had similar perceptions of their relationship management approaches with clients and therefore their perceptions are presented together. Distinctions between the groups of participants are made where their views differ from each other.

Communication agencies' approach to relationship management with their clients

Previous studies established the importance of maintaining long-term relationships with clients to build a sustainable business (e.g. Buttle & Maklan 2019; Kim et al. 2020; Rajhans 2018), which correlates well with the agencies' viewpoint in our study. For example, Participant 1 noted:

> 'Especially because I rely on word of mouth in my business, it is very important for me to have a good relationship with my existing clients in the long run, as well as ones who are referred to me.' (Participant 1)

The importance of mutually beneficial relationships was confirmed:

> 'We want to build long and healthy relationships with them so that it is beneficial for us and for them.' (Participant 14)

Another expanded on this idea by highlighting how they purposefully use communication to build relationships:

> 'I really try to make a point of phoning regularly, emailing, WhatsApping them, checking in with them, to build the relationship.' (Participant 13)

From the interviews, it became apparent that all the agencies value long-term relationships with clients, and that they acknowledge the importance of these relationships in the agency's survival in the competitive and turbulent business environment they function in. The idea of deliberately managing communication with clients to build and maintain relationships also aligns with the assumptions of the stakeholder relationship management theory. One can argue that this view and application is not surprising, seeing that most of the participants are communication professionals, with an educational foundation that includes relationship management with stakeholders.

It is noteworthy that the participants felt that they were successful in creating long-term relationships with their clients in the competitive and VUCA business context. For example:

> 'We have a great relationship with our clients.' (Participant 15)

In the same vein, another argued:

> 'The fact that clients keep renewing contracts with us means that they are happy with our service, and they want to keep working with us.' (Participant 14)

One agency values its relationship with clients so much that they specifically asked for their clients' feedback in this regard:

> 'We asked our clients what their experience is and how they perceive working with us. We got really good feedback and really amazing messages from our clients. I cried tears of joy because we put in a lot of effort into our clients.' (Participant 16)

To determine how the agencies go about creating and maintaining such long-term relationships with clients in the competitive and turbulent business environment, we asked them about their strategies focused on relationship building.

All participants indicated that *access* and *openness* are fundamental parts of their strategies. The participants explained that clients would provide them with information relating to their business and relating to the 'work we are doing for them' (Participant 9), because it is needed to develop a communication strategy for them or to develop the communication product they want. In return, the agencies use their 'expertise' (Participant 5) to guide the client towards 'what is going to work' (Participant 12). The agencies also provide the clients with information related to the work they do for them and ask the clients for input and feedback. In terms of *openness*, most of the participants see open, transparent and honest communication as integral to maintaining relationships with their clients. It seems that the agencies influence the clients' ideas, based on their expert knowledge, but in a way 'that the client is still happy with the end result' (Participant 11). Participants further postulated that not all clients know what they want, making honest, 'straightforward' (Participant 10) communication with clients vital.

The agencies believe that they are honest with their clients after the relationship has been established as well. For example:

> '... we had an issue with the scheduling app and some of our clients' social media posts went out late … we were honest about this and explained the situation.' (Participant 6)

Participant 13 also said that they communicate honestly, even in situations where it will not put the organisation in the best light:

> 'We are very honest with them if it is something that we can't complete today. We will tell them when something can't be completed by the agreed date. However, we communicate that it will be done after other work is completed.' (Participant 13)

Various participants explained that being honest also includes indicating when they do not agree with the clients, but when it is in the best interests of the client's business to share their expert advice. For example, Participant 13 noted:

> 'Obviously there are times when you need to say: "I hear you, but strategically, I don't think this is going to work." It is also an open and honest conversation again.' (Participant 13)

Agencies directly link honesty with *trust*:

> 'Having honest and open communication and conversations about the content that we put out there or the kind of ad campaigns that we do is important to preserve the relationship and trust built with the clients.' (Participant 14)

Many of the participants noted that they also value honest feedback from the clients, particularly on how to improve on the work they have done for them. Participant 16 explained:

> 'I always want my clients to be honest with me. They should tell me if they are unhappy with how I respond to a situation or how I handled something and I will always tell them if I am having difficulty with doing my job if they are not giving me feedback.' (Participant 16)

The quote indicated that the participant is not only open to share information honestly but also prepared to engage in direct discussions with clients based on the client's open and honest communication. We conclude that the agencies use the *access* and *openness* strategy effectively to contribute to the relationship outcome of *trust*, especially on the integrity dimension.

Although the literature links the idea of availability with the *access* strategy (Hon & Grunig 1999:14), the participants placed such a high premium on *availability*, that we want to highlight it as a separate and specific strategy used purposefully by the agencies. Various participants indicated that the agency has an open-door policy towards its clients, and that they make a point of being available to their clients:

> 'Our clients know that they can always call us or pop in if they need anything.' (Participant 15)

> '... we are really, really available for our clients.' (Participant 13)

Participant 14 explained that they are even available outside normal business hours:

> 'I know one of my clients, she'll even call me after five. We are definitely available when it comes to our clients when they need to get in touch with us.' (Participant 14)

Participants also provided examples of being available to clients over weekends and public holidays in emergency cases. One participant indicated that although they do not usually engage with clients over weekends, in a crisis:

> '... we always avail ourselves [*and*] if a crisis happens … then you can phone me anytime.' (Participant 15)

We argue that being (almost always) *available* for clients should not only contribute to the relationship outcome of *satisfaction* and *commitment* but also to *trust* on the dependability dimension.

Many of the participants showed how the agencies utilise the strategies of *positivity* and *assurance* to build relationships with their clients. Different participants stated that they value their clients to the point where they even developed personal relationships and friendships with them. By developing these friendships, the agencies:

> '... show interest in our client's personal life … not only their business.' (Participant 3)

> '... we make time for each other.' (Participant 4)

> '... then the client immediately feels more important to you.' (Participant 7)

Another provided an example of such interactions:

> 'We go out for breakfast just to chat about the business and how my agency can help it grow.' (Participant 10)

Furthermore, another stated that they show their positivity about the association with clients:

> '... by celebrating our clients' successes with them.' (Participant 8)

Participant 4 particularly articulated the importance of positivity as one of their strategies to manage strong relationships with clients by making 'it as enjoyable as possible'.

Participant 14 added:

> 'We try to go the extra mile by checking in on our clients. We know when their birthdays are, so we send them personal messages and send them a small gift if the budget allows to show them that we care about them.' (Participant 14)

Participant 7 similarly explained that they want clients to enjoy working with them:

> 'One of our clients always says that he enjoys coming to us so much because when he walks out, he is energised and excited about his brand and about our path together for the future.' (Participant 7)

In terms of *assurance* of legitimacy, the participants indicated that they go out of their way to make sure they validate their clients and their concerns. Participant 16 explained:

> 'So many of our clients come from other agencies who did not give them enough attention, who took too long to respond to their needs and their questions and stuff they want. So here we want our client to feel comfortable, and we want them to communicate their feelings, thoughts and opinions openly.' (Participant 16)

It was noteworthy that one participant went so far as to say:

> 'We tell our clients that we will treat their brands like our babies.' (Participant 8)

In the same notion, Participant 2 gave another example:

> 'We say to our clients … we are part of your team … we aren't a marketing agency which you go into agreement with and then we just sit in our offices and create your posts … we become part of your team.' (Participant 2)

Participant 15 highlighted the necessity of assuring their clients of the legitimacy of their concerns and addressing them. They indicated that in their agency, there is an individual specifically tasked with handling any client queries that may arise:

> '[*Y*]ou need someone that makes sure that the ball doesn't fall on the ground and that's my office manager. If there are client queries, then she is the one that explicitly handles them.' (Participant 15)

We argue that agencies use the strategies of *positivity* and *assurance* to contribute to the relationship outcomes of *commitment* and *satisfaction*.

In further supporting a *commitment* to the relationship, the *sharing of tasks* as a strategy is evident through a teamwork attitude although participants explained that there is not a balanced sharing of tasks, and that this is not an ideal they are striving towards, as the clients pay them for their expertise and time:

> 'We usually need something technical from their side but for the most part, we do the work.' (Participant 14)

Another supported this idea:

> 'You need to keep in mind that they pay for a service, and service needs to be rendered. That equates to work being done … Tasks aren't shared 50/50 between us, but we understand we were hired to carry out specific services … Work is only shared during the initial process. During this process, we ask questions to get to know their brand, and to get to know what they need from us.' (Participant 13)

Participant 15 and Participant 16 also indicated that the only tasks the clients are responsible for are to provide the information the agency needs to do the work and to provide feedback on the agency's work when required. Most participants highlighted that the agency cannot provide a professional service to the clients if they do not perform these two tasks. Participant 10 explained:

> '[*W*]e can market their brand until we die, but if they don't forward us information on a regular basis, we can't do anything … we will not have content to work with.' (Participant 10)

Likewise, one participant explained that:

> '… sometimes we require clients to do something on their end, such as sending photos … like for a spring day post on Facebook.' (Participant 6)

Another participant clarified that they send content calendars or design proofs to clients for input and feedback, even though there are:

> '... a couple [*of clients*] who you almost never hear back from.' (Participant 11)

In these cases, the agency assumes that the client is happy:

> '... they pay the retainer each month and trust us to do our work.' (Participant 11)

The same participant explained:

> 'When the relationship grows and clients trust you more, they leave it in your hands and give you more control.' (Participant 11)

This could indicate a correlation between *trust* and *mutual control* as relationship indicators in this scenario, although it is unlikely that a failure to communicate would align with quality relationship outcomes.

The participants suggest that they (the agencies) and their clients work together as part of a *cooperating* strategy, seeing that:

> '... both parties put their ideas on the table before any decision is taken.' (Participant 1)

> '... we have interactive sessions between the client and ourselves to make sure we are on the same page.' (Participant 5)

> '... brainstorm in order to find the best possible way to go about the whole concept.' (Participant 9)

Participants stressed that although they give expert advice, decision-making remains with the clients regarding their business.

The focus on *cooperation*, where both parties work together for the benefit of the client, and one party does not make decisions without the other, should contribute to *commitment*, *satisfaction* and *control mutuality* as relationship outcomes.

The agencies seem to *keep their promises* and to deliver on the agreements between them and their clients:

> 'We never over-promise or under-deliver.' (Participant 13)

Similarly, another testified:

> 'We really try not to make promises we can't keep. As soon as it happens that the customer wants something that we can't do, we make sure that we get someone to help us do it.' (Participant 1)

Participant 16 also stressed their commitment to keep their promises:

> 'I have worked plenty of overtime to keep to my deadlines. If I make a promise to my clients, I will keep that promise and I will tell them if it is impossible, but that is the last resort.' (Participant 16)

This strategy aligns directly with the relationship outcome of *trust* in terms of the dimensions of dependability and competence, seeing that the agency produced what it promised.

Some participants strongly confirmed that the agencies were *being unconditionally constructive* in their relationship with clients. Participant 8 gave an example of how they were attentive to their clients' financial abilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, even though the agency was also experiencing financial pressure:

> 'During this time, we offered to help our clients who were facing financial restraint at no cost. This showed that we had real concerns regarding external factors and also that we were committed to the relationship. We were willing to deliver services pro-rata until clients were able to find financial stability in the future.' (Participant 8)

Rather than focusing on short-term gratifications and financial gain, the agency realised the importance of community bonds in achieving long-term sustainable relationships with clients. Furthermore, Participant 10 suggested that they 'always walk the extra mile' for their clients, and Participant 4 mentioned that many times they will do 'things for a client which we do not even put on the account to pay'. This mindset demonstrates generosity and *commitment* towards their client relationships by constantly providing more than what was expected or what they were paid for:

> '... we are not doing this because we are getting huge salaries from it … we are just doing it to see their [*the clients'*] business flourish.' (Participant 4)

The agency in this instance is willing to do whatever it considers best for the relationship with the client, and this strategy directly aligns with a *communal relationship type*.

Participant 15 supported this idea of aiming for a communal relationship rather than an exchange relationship:

> 'This does not mean that we treat our clients because we want a transactional relationship. These people are like our family or friends, and we will treat them as such.' (Participant 15)

Numerous participants believed that building *networks* means building relationships or having contacts with people outside of the agency–client relationship, from whom their clients can also benefit. For example, Participant 3 suggested:

> '[*We*] are well connected because we are involved at the local Chamber of Commerce, and I think it is a big benefit for our clients. We also know other businesses whom we can introduce to our clients and get them to enter into a commitment, which will then be beneficial for our clients.' (Participant 3)

On the one hand, participants indicated that they often use their existing networks to the benefit of their clients, by putting them in contact with individuals and organisations who can contribute to the client's business. On the other hand, the participants recognised the value for the agency when connecting to their clients' existing networks. For example, Participant 15 explained:

> 'My client introduced us to his network and he asked us to send him a profile of what we do … The next day we were working for his business.' (Participant 15)

Participant 13 also mentioned this strategy:

> 'Building networks with the same people your clients know is important and beneficial for the company. Not only are we opening our doors to more opportunities, but we are able to build better relationships with our clients due to us knowing the same groups, companies or people.' (Participant 13)

From the findings, it became clear that the agencies are using the *networking* strategy efficiently to benefit both the agency and their clients. This practice can be linked to the outcomes of *commitment* and *satisfaction*.

An additional strategy the agencies used is that of *understanding*, moving beyond mutual understanding as conceptualised in theory (see Hon & Grunig 1999; Kent & Lane 2021; Ledingham & Bruning 2001). The participants consistently highlighted the importance of understanding both their clients' needs and expectations and the environment of their clients' businesses to deliver the best service. Participant 15 explained:

> 'The more you know the client through dialogue … the more you tend to understand the client and what the needs are, and you have more to understand the clients' business ... If you don't exactly understand what their business is all about then you won't be able to advise.' (Participant 15)

Participants from different agencies stressed the need for research to make sure they understand their clients' businesses. Participant 16 explained:

> 'We conduct some research on their industry and get to know their needs; in terms of what's their client-base, and what's their target market. So, we need to do some research about their industry and their business for us to understand their needs.' (Participant 16)

> '... so we will fact-find on what consumer behaviour says, what makes people tick, what makes them buy and then we will evaluate those findings.' (Participant 13)

From the above, it is clear that the agencies purposefully focused on *understanding* to build and maintain long-term relationships with their clients. We argue that this can be linked to the outcomes of *commitment* and *trust* on the competence level.

Interestingly, most of the participants highlighted *dual concern* strategies that were asymmetrical. The participants continuously emphasised two-way communication and stated that communication between them and their clients was crucial. However, the 'negotiations' to 'reach a middle ground' (Participant 8) sometimes take the form of asymmetrical communication (see Grunig & Huang 2000). It seems that the agencies used persuasion in their communication with clients. As one participant explained, they communicate during negotiations with clients as follows:

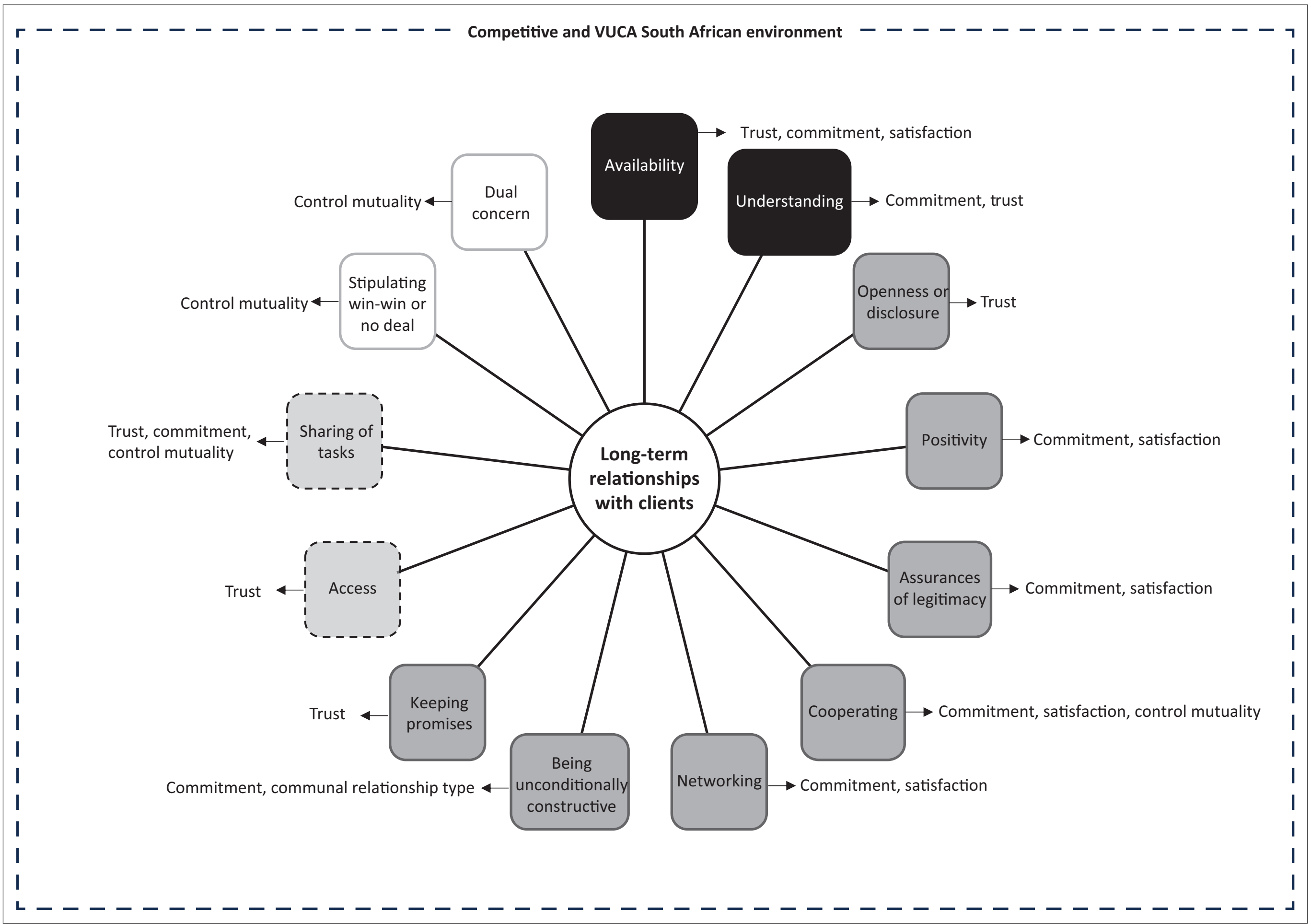
> 'I hear you. However, these are the reasons why we might not agree with you.' (Participant 9)

It is crucial to note that these asymmetrical communication strategies are primarily used for symmetrical communication purposes, where the agency tries to persuade the client of options they believe, in their expert opinion, would be the most beneficial for the client's business. The participants stated that there were times when this middle ground could not be reached and compromises needed to be made, which meant that one party – usually the client – would have their way. In these situations, it would usually not be to the detriment of the agency or the client, but rather the agency believing that the decision was not the best for the client's business. It is noticeable that the agencies strive to obtain a mutual understanding between them and their clients since negotiation and compromise between them occur, indicating a *mutual control* outcome in the relationship.

From the findings, the following conceptual framework is proposed (see Figure 1), outlining the conclusions of the study. The solid black strategies are the newly identified strategies to build relationships in this context, the strategies in grey boxes with a solid outline are the strategies from literature employed by the agencies, the strategies in light grey with dotted outlines are utilised by the agencies but not entirely according to literature's prescriptions, and the solid white strategies are utilised to a lesser extent. The relationship outcomes related to each strategy are mentioned next to the strategy blocks. The competitive and VUCA South African environment in which the communication agencies operate encircles the relationships that agencies build and maintain with their clients.

Conclusion and recommendations

Prior work has documented that relationship management with external stakeholders is needed for the organisation to



VUCA, volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous.

FIGURE 1: Proposed conceptual framework.

survive and be sustainable (e.g. Chen & Lee 2022; Karantinou & Hogg 2001). However, these studies were not done within the field of relationship management, have either been carried out in an international or Western setting and did not focus on utilising strategies to manage and maintain relationships with clients in the competitive local VUCA environment. In this study, we explored communication agencies' strategies utilised to facilitate long-term relationships with their clients, from a relationship management perspective.

From the findings, it is clear that the communication agencies used the strategies of openness, positivity, assurance, networking, cooperating, being unconditionally constructive and keeping promises as defined in the seminal literature (Grunig 2002; Grunig & Huang 2000; Hon & Grunig 1999), to contribute to the relationship outcomes of satisfaction, commitment, trust and control mutuality (Hon & Grunig 1999). Participants also indicated that from their side, they view their relationship with clients as communal, rather than exchange relationships.

In terms of access and task sharing, it seems as if they do not apply these two strategies exactly as defined in the literature. Apart from access to information, Hon and Grunig (1999), Grunig and Huang (2000) and Grunig (2002) also include access to organisational decision-making in the access strategy. From the interviews, it is clear that the parties provide each other with access to information, and that they make joint decisions on the work the agencies are doing for the clients. However, they are not directly involved in each other's organisational decision-making. This situation does not seem to be a problem in the relationship, and we do not see the necessity of access to organisational decision-making in the agency–client relationship if all parties are content with shared decision-making only in terms of the work the agency does for the clients.

Regarding sharing of tasks, the literature proposes a relatively balanced sharing of tasks to solve problems that concern the other party or that are in the interest of the organisation, the stakeholder or both (Grunig & Huang 2000; Hon & Grunig 1999). The participants indicated that although both the agency and the clients have certain roles and tasks, there is not a balanced or equal sharing of tasks, neither should there be, given that they are paid to provide certain services for the clients. We agree that although there should be some form of task sharing, a balanced sharing of tasks in the specific context of an agency–client relationship is not compulsory.

From the available data, it cannot be discerned if the strategies of stipulating win-win or no deal, or dual concerns are applied. In the discussion, it was indicated that the agencies sometimes used asymmetrical communication, which is not in line with the ideal as indicated in dual concern (Hon & Grunig 1999), but the outcomes of these asymmetrical strategies were to the benefit of the client, not the benefit of the agency to the detriment of the client. In this specific context, the practice of these strategies is not entirely according to theoretical stipulation, but still with a positive effect on the relationship.

Two additional strategies that the agencies used emerged from our findings that are not clearly differentiated in the seminal literature (Grunig 2002; Grunig & Huang 2000; Hon & Grunig 1999), in scholars' research who developed strategies in other contexts, such as relationships in the online environment (Waters et al. 2009) and fundraising relationships (Waters 2009), nor Slabbert's (2012) stakeholder-relationship framework for building organisation–stakeholder partnerships. These two strategies are availability and understanding. In the agency context, being (constantly) available to clients contributes to the relationship outcomes of commitment, satisfaction and trust on the dependability level. Having a clear understanding of not only the clients' needs but also their industry and context allows the agency to provide the best possible service and therefore contribute to the relationship outcomes of commitment and trust on the competence level. It is clear why the agencies purposefully incorporate these two strategies in addition to the other communication strategies to build and maintain long-term relationships with clients in a highly competitive and volatile environment. These two new strategies employed to foster relationships in the specific context offer a starting point for future research, and other studies can take this direction further to contribute to the body of knowledge on relationship management strategies.

In all cases, the communication agencies in our study survived through the COVID-19 pandemic and were purposively selected for the multiple case study design of this study. They employ strategies to sustain long-term relationships with their clients in a difficult and competitive environment. This study therefore indicates that the strategies, as identified by Hon and Grunig (1999) more than two decades ago, are still relevant for sustaining long-term relationships with clients. It also confirms that agencies should approach their relationship with clients from a relationship management perspective and not from a marketing or business management perspective only. The link between long-term relationships built by employing strategies and the sustainability of an organisation, especially in the post-COVID-19 environment, needs to be extended in future research. On a practical level, the findings of our study can guide other communication agencies, consultancies and small start-ups in their approach to relationship management with external stakeholders in order to survive in the turbulent and competitive business environment.

We would advise communication agencies, and other start-ups and small organisations to deliberately evaluate the relationship outcomes (trust, commitment, mutual control and satisfaction) to determine the quality of the agency–client relationship. Although the agencies in our study used strategies to maintain the relationship and, in many cases, believed that they were building long-term relationships, formal research to evaluate the quality indicators of the relationships can assist these agencies in understanding the relationship from their clients' perspective and identify their own strengths and weaknesses to inform even more focused communication strategies.

This study addresses the call for more research using a case study design in relationship management scholarship on the African continent (Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman 2023), for more qualitative research in the field to have a deeper understanding of relationship strategies in various contexts (Harrison 2023), and more research on strategies to build the relationship between organisations and stakeholders (Ki et al. 2023). Furthermore, Mersham et al. (2011) argued that American and European relationship management theories are not always applicable to African contexts. Our study is the first local study to investigate a communication agency perspective on managing relationships with their clients in the struggling South African economy. The multiple case study design was deliberately chosen to contribute to the relationship management literature in the non-Western context.

Our findings on the communication agencies' approach to utilising strategies in their relationship management are encouraging, but are constrained by its qualitative nature and limited to the communication agencies' perspective. Future studies should broaden the scope of research to determine the perceptions of other stakeholders such as existing and prospective clients in a quantitative study. The proposed conceptual framework presented in this study should empirically be tested and adapted for other contexts. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could offer insights into how organisations develop, employ and adjust their strategies to maintain relationships over time, and case studies should be conducted to help offer insights for other organisations based on relationship strategies that have both succeeded and failed.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the honours students in the Advanced Corporate Communication programme at the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus) who did the fieldwork as part of an established research project for a period of 3 years, focussing on communication agencies' communication management with clients. The honours students have training in research methodology, including the use of semi-structured interviews as research method, and research ethics. Supervisors guided students in the conceptualisation of interview guides and approved the final interview guides before interviews commenced. In most instances, the supervisors were present while the interviews were

conducted, while the students conducted the interviews independently in some instances.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

L.B.S. was the project leader. L.B.S., E.M.K. and L.B. were responsible for data analysis, made conceptual contributions and co-wrote the manuscript.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the North-West University Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and ethics consent was received on 27 May 2021. The ethics approval number is Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) (No. NWU-00625-21-A7).

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article (direct quotes from participants). The recordings and transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews are not publicly available because of ethical restrictions, as they could contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

Adonis, A., 2022, 'Entrepreneurs are crucial in SA's fight against unemployment', *IOL*, viewed 12 September 2023, from https://www.iol.co.za/business-report/entrepreneurs/entrepreneurs-are-crucial-in-sas-fight-against-unemployment-c84c99d4-f1f7-4759-8b3e-9031753f8e5d.

Anderson, J., Rainie, L. & Vogels, E.A., 2021, *Experts say the "new normal" in 2025 will be far more tech-driven, presenting more big challenges*, PEW Research Centre, viewed 13 September 2023, from https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/02/18/experts-say-the-new-normal-in-2025-will-be-far-more-tech-driven-presenting-more-big-challenges/.

Babatunde, K.A., 2022, 'Public relations and social media for effective crisis communication management', *Jurnal Bina Praja: Journal of Home Affairs Governance* 14(3), 543–553. https://doi.org/10.21787/jbp.14.2022.543-553

Babbie, E. & Mouton, J., 2001, *The practice of social research*, Oxford University Press Southern Africa, Cape Town.

Briones, R.L., Kuch, B., Liu, B.F. & Jin, Y., 2011, 'Keeping up with the digital age: How the American Red Cross uses social media to build relationships', *Public Relations Review* 37(1), 37–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.12.006

Buttle, F. & Maklan, S., 2019, *Customer relationship management: Concepts and technologies*, Routledge, London.

Chen, Z.F. & Lee, J.Y., 2022, 'Relationship cultivation and social capital: Female transnational entrepreneurs' relationship-based communication on social media', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 16(2), 182–205. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2021.2005069

Cheng, Y., 2018, 'Looking back, moving forward: A review and reflection of the organization-public relationship (OPR) research', *Public Relations Review* 44(1), 120–130. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.10.003

Chetty, R., Beharry-Ramraj, A. & Gurayah, J.R., 2022, 'The impacts of Covid-19 on youth entrepreneurship in South Africa', *African Journal of Development Studies* Si1, 223–242. https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3649/2022/SIv2a13

Ciambotti, G., Sgrò, F., Bontis, N. & Zaccone, M.C., 2021, 'Local relationships matter! The impact of intellectual capital on entrepreneurial bricolage in African entrepreneurs', *Knowledge Process Management* 28, 321–330. https://doi.org/10.1002/kpm.1678

Daboun, O., Md Yusof, A. & Khoso, A.R., 2023, 'Relationship management in construction projects: Systematic literature review', *Engineering Management Journal* 35(2), 120–143. https://doi.org/10.1080/10429247.2022.2041962

Du Plooy, G.M., 2009, *Communication research: Techniques, methods and applications*, 2nd edn., Juta, Cape Town.

Dyll, L.E. & Tomaselli, K.G., 2016, 'Rethinking the researcher-researched relationship: Research participants as prodsumers', *Communicare* 35(1), 1–20. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC195360

Enke, N. & Borchers, N.S., 2019, 'Social media influencers in strategic communication: A conceptual framework for strategic social media influencer communication', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 13(4), 261–277. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2019.1620234

Estanyol, E., 2012, 'Marketing, public relations, and how Web 2.0 is changing their relationship: A qualitative assessment of PR consultancies operating in Spain', *Public Relations Review* 38(5), 831–837. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2012.04.006

Garcia, A., 2020, *Top challenges digital marketing agencies are facing*, viewed 18 February 2023, from https://martechseries.com/mts-insights/guest-authors/top-challenges-digital-marketing-agencies-are-facing/.

Goodwin, D., 2003, 'Global perspectives … What is a communication professional's chief strategic role within an organization?', *Communication World* October/November, 8–9.

Goyayi, M.L., 2022, *Why tackling graduate unemployment in SA is important for post-Covid19 economic recovery*, viewed 07 September 2023, from https://ddp.org.za/blog/2022/06/03/why-tackling-graduate-unemployment-in-sa-is-important-for-post-covid19-economic-recovery/.

Greeff, W.J., 2013, 'Precedent predictions and present practice: A stakeholder theory account of safety communication significance for the mining and construction industries of South Africa', *Communicare* 32(1), 38–57. https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v32i1.1625

Grunig, J.E., 2002, 'Qualitative methods for assessing relationships between organizations and publics', in L.A. Hon & J.E. Grunig (eds.), *Guidelines for measuring relationships in public relations* 1(3), 1–40. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1201_4

Grunig, J.E. & Hon, L., 1999, 'Guidelines for measuring relationships in public relations', paper presented at The Institute for Public Relations Commission on PR Measurement and Evaluation, Gainesville, FL, viewed 12 February 2020, from http://www.instituteforpr.com/measeval/rel_p1.htm.

Grunig, J.E. & Huang, Y., 2000, 'From organizational effectiveness to relationship indicators: Antecedents of relationships, public relationships, public relations strategies and relationship outcomes', in J.A. Ledingham & S.D. Bruning (eds.), *Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations*, pp. 23–54, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ.

Harrison, V.S., 2023, 'Why relationships fail: Donor insights on defining and understanding successes and failures in nonprofit stewardship', *Journal of Public Relations Research* 35(4), 236–258. https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2023.2198237

Hocking, J.E., Stack, D.W. & Mcdermott, S.T., 2003, *Communication research*, 3rd edn., Allyn & Bacon, Boston, MA.

Holtzhausen, L. & Fourie, L.M., 2013, 'The relationship between corporate identity-management constructs and relationship-management constructs: A case study of the North-West University', *Communicare* 32(1), 58–83. https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v32i1.1613

Holtzhausen, L., Fourie, L.M. & Naudè, A.M.E., 2008, 'Employees' perceptions of symbolic corporate identity elements and employer-employee relationships at Lonmin Platinum', *Communicare* 27(1), 19–40. https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v27i1-2.1740

Hon, L.C. & Grunig, J.E., 1999, *Measuring relationships in public relations*, Institute of Public Relations, Gainesville, FL.

Hung, C.J.F., 2007, 'Toward the theory of relationship management in public relations: How to cultivate quality relationships?', in E.L. Toth (ed.), *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management: Challenges for the next generation*, pp. 443–476, Routledge, New York.

Iannacone, J.I., 2021, 'Understanding INGO relationship management: A case study approach to multinational organization–public relationships', *Public Relations Review* 47(4), 102076. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102076

Johansen, W., 2017, 'Understanding and practicing crisis consulting: A study of public relations and communications firms', *Journal of Communication Management* 21(2), 106–123. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-12-2016-0104

Karantinou, K.M. & Hogg, M.K., 2001, 'Exploring relationship management in professional services: A study of management consultancy', *Journal of Marketing Management* 17(3–4), 263–286.

Kent, M.L. & Lane, A., 2021, 'Two-way communication, symmetry, negative spaces, and dialogue', *Public Relations Review* 47(2), 102014. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102014

Ki, E., Ertem-Eray, T. & Hayden, G., 2023, 'A bibliometric analysis of relationship management as a scholarly field from 1997 to 2022', *Public Relations Review* 49(1), 102286. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2023.102286

Ki, E., Pasadeos, Y. & Ertem-Eray, T., 2019, 'Growth of public relations research networks: A bibliometric analysis', *Journal of Public Relations Research* 31(1–2), 5–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2019.1577739

Kim, M., Yin, X. & Lee, G., 2020, 'The effect of CSR on corporate image, customer citizenship behaviors, and customers' long-term relationship orientation', *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 88, 102520. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102520

Labarca, C. & Ampuero Ruiz, P., 2021, 'Cultural and global perspectives to relationship management in international public relations: The Sino-Chilean case study', *International Communication Gazette* 83(8), 776–798. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048520929817

Labarca, C., Arceneaux, P.C. & Golan, G.J., 2020, 'The relationship management function of public affairs officers in Chile: Identifying opportunities and challenges in an emergent market', *Journal of Public Affairs* 20(3), e2080. https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2080

Ledingham, J.A. & Bruning, S.D., 2001, *Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations*, Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ.

Lee, Y. & Kim, K.H., 2020, 'De-motivating employees' negative communication behaviors on anonymous social media: The role of public relations', *Public Relations Review* 46(4), 101955. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.101955

Lee, Y. & Kim, K.H., 2021, 'Enhancing employee advocacy on social media: The value of internal relationship management approach', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 26(2), 311–327. https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-05-2020-0088

Lindlof, T.R. & Taylor, B.C., 2019, *Qualitative communication research methods*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Mambadja, S.M.T, Conradie, D.P. & Van der Waldt, D., 2015, 'Stakeholder relationship strategies on Facebook used by South African universities', *Communicare* 34(2), 58–74. https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v34i2.1614

Men, L.R., Vielledent, M., Yue, C.A. & Zhou, A., 2023, 'Digital corporate communication and stakeholder relationship management', in V. Luoma-aho & M. Badham (eds.), *Handbook on Digital Corporate Communication*, pp. 103–117, Edward Elgar Publishing, UK.

Mersham, G., Skinner, C. & Rensburg, R., 2011, 'Approaches to African communication management and public relations: A case for theory-building on the continent', *Journal of Public Affairs* 11(4), 195–207. https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.413

Meyer, I. & Barker, R., 2020, 'A metamodern model for managing stakeholder relationships in non-profit organisations', *Communicare* 39(1), 56–79. https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v39i1.1529

Mhlongo, T. & Daya, P., 2023, 'Challenges faced by small, medium and micro enterprises in Gauteng: A case for entrepreneurial leadership as an essential tool for success', *Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management* 15(1), a591. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajesbm.v15i1.591

Mills, J. & Clark, M., 1994, 'Communal and exchange relationships: Controversies and research', in R. Erber & R. Gilmour (eds.), *Theoretical frameworks for personal relationships*, pp. 29–42, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillside, NJ.

Moser, A. & Korstjens, I., 2018, 'Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 3: Sampling, data collection and analysis', *European Journal of General Practice* 24(1), 9–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375091

Mubarik, S., Candran, V.G.R. & Devadason, E.S., 2016, 'Relational capital quality and client loyalty: Firm-level evidence from pharmaceuticals in Pakistan', *The Learning Organization* 23(1), 43–60. https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-05-2015-0030

Mulcahy, E., 2020, 'Digital agencies beyond 2020: How to survive and thrive in the future', *The Drum*, viewed 18 February 2021, from https://www.thedrum.com/news/2020/08/19/digital-agencies-beyond-2020-how-survive-and-thrive-the-future.

Ni, L., Dai, Y. & Liu, W., 2022, 'Dynamics between fragmentation and unity: Identity and nonprofit relationship management in the Asian American Community', *Public Relations Review* 48(2), 102157. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2022.102157

Nutsugah, N. & Anani-Bossman, A., 2023, 'Development of public relations research in Ghana: A systematic review', *Public Relations Review* 49(4), 102348. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2023.102348

Park, H. & Reber, B.H., 2008, 'Relationship building and the use of Web sites: How Fortune 500 corporations use their Web sites to build relationships', *Public Relations Review* 34(4), 409–411. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2008.06.006

Patton, M.Q., 2015, *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*, 4th edn., Thousand Oaks, Sage, CA.

Pressgrove, G.N. & McKeever, B.W., 2016, 'Nonprofit relationship management: Extending the organization-public relationship to loyalty and behaviors', *Journal of Public Relations Research* 28(3–4), 193–211. https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2016.1233106

Pressgrove, G., McKeever, R., McKeever, B. & Waters, R., 2022, 'Investigating membership retention: Employing public relations theory to better understand relationship management', *Journal of Nonprofit and Public Sector Marketing* 36(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/10495142.2022.2130497

Rajhans, K., 2018, 'Effective communication management: A key to stakeholder relationship management in project-based organizations', *IUP Journal of Soft Skills* 12(4), 47–66.

Samanga, R., 2019, *South Africa's unemployment rate at a record high*, viewed 11 September 2023, from https://www.okayafrica.com/south-africa-unemployment-rate-record/.

Shen, H. & Jiang, H., 2021, 'Rethinking internal public relations: Organizations and publics as community members', *Journal of Public Relations Research* 33(6), 415–428. https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2022.2043155

Slabbert, Y., 2012, 'A sequential, integrated, sustainable organisation-stakeholder relationship (SISOSR) process for building organisation-stakeholder partnerships: A conceptual framework', *Communicare* 31(2), 1–28.

Smith, A.W. & Waddington, S., 2023, *Artificial intelligence (AI) tools and the impact on public relations (PR) practice*, Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), viewed 11 September 2023, from https://newsroom.cipr.co.uk/cipr-report-finds-ai-tools-in-public-relations-set-to-explode/.

Statistics South Africa, 2023, *P0211 – Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS), 1st Quarter 2023*, viewed 07 September 2023, from https://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1854&PPN=P0211&SCH=73571.

Steenkamp, H. & Dhanesh, G.S., 2023, 'Care-based relationship management during remote work in a crisis: Empathy, purpose, and diversity climate as emergent employee-organization relational maintenance strategies', *Public Relations Review* 49(4), 102371. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2023.102371

Sutton, L.B., Le Roux, T. & Fourie, LM., 2022, 'Internal communication in a diverse and developing world context: Challenges for corporate South Africa', *Communicare* 41(2), 90–102. https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v41i2.1452

Tong, S.C., 2022, 'Public relations practice in the digital era: Trust and commitment in the interplay of interactivity effects and online relational strategies', *Journal of Marketing Communications* 28(7), 799–819. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2021.1951814

Udayana, I.B.N., Farida, N., Lukitaningsih, A. & Nuryakin, H.K.T., 2021, 'The important role of customer bonding capability to increase marketing performance in small and medium enterprises', *Cogent Business and Management* 8, 1932239. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2021.1932239

United Nations, 2015, *World Population Ageing, Report ST/ESA/SER.A/390, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division*, New York, viewed 03 July 2021, from https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2015_Report.pdf.

Valackiene, A., 2010, 'Efficient corporate communication: Decisions in crisis management', *Engineering Economics* 21(1), 99–110.

Van Wyk, I., 2023, 'Strategic decision-making in small and medium enterprises in South Africa', *Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management* 15(1), a684. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajesbm.v15i1.684

Wang, Y., Huang, Y.H.C. & Cai, Q., 2022, 'Exploring the mediating role of government–public relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic: A model comparison approach', *Public Relations Review* 48(4), 102231. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2022.102231

Waters, R.D., 2009, 'Measuring stewardship in public relations: A test exploring impact on the fundraising relationship', *Public Relations Review* 35(2), 113–119. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2009.01.012

Waters, R.D., Burnett, E., Lamm, A. & Lucas, J., 2009, 'Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How non-profit organisations are using Facebook', *Public Relations Review* 35(2), 102–106. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2009.01.006

WeAreCom, 2022, *Urssaf: décryptage d'une communication au service de l'intérêt general*, viewed 20 September 2023, from https://www.wearecom.fr/2023/07/urssaf-decryptage-dune-communication-au-service-de-linteret-general-urssaf-estelle-denize/.

Weber, R.P., 1990, *Basic content analysis*, 2nd edn., Sage, Newbury Park, CA.

Wix, 2020, *Digital agencies beyond 2020: A glimpse into the future*, viewed 18 February 2021, from https://pages.contentive.com/rs/243-MRR-459/images/Wix_eBook_Digital_Agencies_in_2020.pdf?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiT0RjM01ETTBOVGhqTWpCbSIsInQiOiJVQ1hFYWcwdEhXQXhiTmtjME9JSVBFdytOUFwvanhjR21FWFwva2l5YWxLRzVlczRwTzdUa2pNUW43bmF2bGxzOFd5cDlkNVpXdUh4VFNrMk5CUE4wdUlKV29xTVlyT25HY0tqUmx5R055bG9vQ0VhY2Z6S0swN21qUmlSNmtkUzB4In0%3D.

Wiggill, M.N., 2017, 'Retaining blood donors: A relationship management perspective', *Communicare* 36(1), 79–93. https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v36i1.1588

Wolcott, H.F., 2001, *Writing up qualitative research*, 3rd edn., SAGE, Newbury Park, CA.

Wright, G. & Wigmore, I., 2023, *VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity)*, viewed 05 April 2023, from https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/VUCA-volatility-uncertainty-complexity-and-ambiguity.

Zerfass, A., Tench, R., Verčič, D., Moreno, A., Buhmann, A. & Hagelstein, J., 2023, 'European Communication Monitor 2023. Looking back and ahead: 15 years of research on strategic communication', *EUPRERA/EACD*, viewed 08 September 2023, from https://www.communicationmonitor.eu/2023/09/07/ecm-european-communication-monitor-2023/.

Zou, W., Kumaraswamy, M., Chung, J. & Wong, J., 2014, 'Identifying the critical success factors for relationship management in PPP projects', *International Journal of Project Management* 32(2), 265–274. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2013.05.004