




# CI Practices to Gain Competitive Advantage through Social Media in the PR Industry

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**Background:** In today's evolving business ecosystem, the strategic integration of competitive intelligence (CI) is essential for organisations aiming to sustain and enhance their competitive positioning. As digitalisation reshapes operational landscapes, CI emerges as a pivotal mechanism for navigating complex market dynamics. This study investigated how CI, in conjunction with social media, catalyses innovation and competitive differentiation within the public relations (PR) industry.

**Objectives:** The research explored how the South African PR industry uses CI and social media to gain a competitive advantage. Drawing upon literature on CI, social media, and competitive strategy. Michael Porter's 'Five Forces' framework was used to contextualise CI within broader organisational strategies.

**Method:** A qualitative research methodology was employed using interviews with PR specialists. A cross-sectional time horizon was used to capture current CI practices, and participants were selected through non-probability snowball sampling. Thematic analysis was conducted to interpret the data and generate insights on CI and social media application.

**Results:** The findings showed that social media plays a critical role in securing competitive advantage, though CI adoption is inconsistent in terminology and implementation. Many agencies outsource CI for specialised expertise. Porter's model highlighted strong supplier bargaining power, demand for sustainability, low client turnover due to unique services, low entry barriers, and collaboration among independent practitioners.

**Conclusion:** CI and social media support PR agencies in enhancing strategy and maintaining competitiveness in a dynamic market.

**Contribution:** The study deepens understanding of CI in PR, especially its integration with social media and diverse approaches shaping industry practice.

**Keywords:** competitive intelligence; social media; public relations; competitive advantage, porter's five forces

## Introduction

In the rapidly evolving business landscape, organisations must constantly adapt to remain competitive. One of the most critical tools for navigating these challenges is competitive intelligence (CI), which enables businesses to collect and analyse information about market competition and other environmental factors. Competitive intelligence plays a pivotal role in helping organisations make informed decisions and gain a competitive edge. According to previous research, organisations that leverage CI effectively are more innovative, agile and successful in the face of competition, while those without it struggle to survive (Jasima, Sulaimanb & Zakuanc 2020). As businesses increasingly rely on data-driven insights, the integration of social media platforms into CI practices has significantly transformed how organisations gather intelligence and engage with their target audiences (Hassani & Mosconi 2022).

The role of CI in organisational success is further emphasised by its impact on decision-making and strategy development. Market analysis, competitor profiling and technological assessments are just a few of the critical components of CI that contribute to a firm's ability to respond to market shifts and anticipate emerging trends (McLean & Woods 2019). Additionally, the increasing prominence of digital media and social media platforms has altered the way organisations conduct CI, particularly within industries like PR. The PR sector, traditionally

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focused on managing organisational reputation and building relationships with stakeholders, has been profoundly impacted by the advent of social media tools. These tools not only facilitate faster communication but also offer real-time analytics that can shape competitive strategies (Freberg 2019).

From a scientific perspective, the study of CI and social media in the South African PR industry offers significant value by addressing an existing gap in the literature. Although the importance of CI is well documented, its application within the PR sector – especially in the context of social media – remains underexplored. This research aims to fill this gap by examining how PR agencies in South Africa use CI practices to gain competitive advantages through social media platforms. The existing body of knowledge provides insights into the importance of CI in strategic decision-making, but limited attention has been given to how PR professionals are leveraging digital tools for competitive intelligence gathering. By focusing on the South African PR industry, this research brings context-specific insights that can inform strategic decision-making within the local market while contributing to the broader global understanding of CI's role in modern business practices.

This study is underpinned by Porter's Five Forces model, which provides a theoretical framework for analysing the competitive dynamics of industries. Porter's model allows for evaluating factors such as the threat of new entrants, the bargaining power of suppliers and customers and the rivalry among existing competitors. By applying this framework, this research will assess how CI and social media tools contribute to the competitive positioning of PR agencies in South Africa. Additionally, this study will explore the organisational factors – such as culture and structure – that influence CI practices and the adoption of social media tools within the PR sector.

The overarching aim of this research is to understand how the South African PR industry utilises CI and social media to gain a competitive advantage. Specifically, the study seeks to identify best practices in CI, explore the social media tools used within the industry and provide actionable insights for PR agencies on how to leverage these tools effectively. By doing so, this study seeks to equip organisations with the knowledge and strategies required to enhance their competitiveness, anticipate market shifts and respond proactively to evolving business environments. It does so by addressing the central research question: 'How does the South African PR industry use CI to attain a competitive advantage through social media in South Africa?' To answer this question, the researcher collected and analysed data to address the following sub-questions:

1. What are the current best CI practices used in the PR industry?
2. Which social media tools are used within the PR industry?

3. How can PR agencies leverage the use of social media to develop and maintain a competitive advantage?

## Literature review

The literature review looked at existing research on competitive intelligence, competitive advantage and social media and outlined essential themes to understand the use of these disciplines.

According to Iroaganachi (2022), CI plays a critical role in decision-making by helping businesses understand their competitors and the broader business environment. It enables organisations to identify risks, uncover opportunities and inform strategies, especially during times of uncertainty. Although the benefits of CI, such as improved market positioning and customer service, are widely recognised, they often lack measurable proof. Nevertheless, Iroaganachi argues that CI is crucial in guiding businesses through challenges and ensuring they remain competitive in a rapidly changing landscape.

According to Kettani and Aljandali (2022), CI encompasses several key activities, including monitoring trends, shaping public perceptions and protecting valuable information. However, it is important to note that the scope of CI is broader than these components and includes a variety of methods to gather and analyse data depending on the specific needs and goals of the organisation.

## Definitions

The term competitive intelligence (CI) has evolved over the past few decades. It has become a key business tool for strategic management and has gained prominence as a practice that enables organisations to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Asghari et al. 2020). According to Waithaka (2016), CI is viewed both as a practice aimed at achieving results and as a condition for organisational survival. It is considered essential for strategic decision-making and plays a fundamental role in an organisation's proactiveness, which is the key to attaining a competitive advantage. Competitive intelligence is also recognised as vital to the growth and profitability of an organisation, particularly within a constantly evolving business environment.

For the purpose of this study, CI is defined as a systematic and strategic process employed by organisations, particularly within the public relations industry, used to gather, analyse and transform competitor and market data into actionable insights. By leveraging these insights, organisations can shape their strategies, adapt to the dynamic business environment and achieve a competitive advantage through social media. This approach involves not only the technical aspects of data collection but also integrates organisational factors such as culture, openness to external information and the decision-making processes of individuals within

the organisation (Cavallo et al. 2021; Maluleka & Chummun 2023; McLean & Woods 2019). In essence, CI enables organisations to respond proactively to market changes, uncover new opportunities and sustain growth and profitability.

### Competitive intelligence processes

According to Köseoglu et al. (2021), the CI process, which is often discussed in terms of marketing practices, encompasses more than just examining competitors' outward strategies. While marketing intelligence provides valuable insights, there is a comprehensive framework that includes aspects such as image, objectives, strategies, organisation and qualitative elements like corporate culture. This entails identifying primary and secondary intelligence sources, including employee connections and publicly available reports. Additionally, corporate online reviews offer a newer avenue for competitor analysis, necessitating a shift towards firm-level scrutiny.

### Competitive intelligence and social media

According to Castillo et al. (2021), social media has become a crucial tool for businesses to transform digitally. Although our understanding of this phenomenon is still developing, social media can be used to collect, monitor and analyse data to generate business values. Social media analytics is the process of gathering and analysing data from various social media platforms to support business decisions and measure the performance of actions taken based on those decisions. This process includes monitoring social channels for issues and opportunities – commonly known as social listening – and employing software platforms to retrieve and analyse data on keywords or topics across multiple channels.

### Competitive advantage

The concept of competitive advantage is a central element of corporate strategy and is often developed and implemented using established strategic management frameworks such as Porter's Five Forces (Porter 1980), the resource-based view (Barney 1991) and Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis (Gürel & Tat 2017). Competitive advantage can be understood from both internal and external perspectives. Internally, it is built on an organisation's distinctive capabilities – such as innovation, efficient operations or strong leadership – which must be clearly identified and effectively nurtured (Barney 1991). Externally, competitive advantage is reflected in an organisation's ability to respond to market dynamics from a position of strength, control and stability. According to Al-Nawafah et al. (2022), the research suggests that competitive advantage is commonly achieved through cost leadership and differentiation strategies.

Clauss et al. (2021) argued that achieving a competitive edge is especially critical for companies that rely on innovation as a core differentiator. In an increasingly

competitive business environment, organisations often adopt innovation strategies not only to enhance their products or services but also to set themselves apart from rivals. Research suggests that organisational capabilities such as ambidexterity – the ability to balance exploration and exploitation – and strategic agility significantly contribute to strengthening a firm's competitive position (Clauss et al. 2021). Supporting this view, Hossain et al. (2021) described a competitive strategy as a coordinated and integrated set of actions designed to achieve a sustainable advantage over competitors. These strategic approaches are essential for firms seeking to navigate dynamic markets and sustain long-term growth.

### Social media

Social media has evolved into a powerful tool for enhancing competitive intelligence and gaining a competitive advantage in today's dynamic business environment. As technologies continue to advance, so too does the definition and utility of social media, which Greenhow and Chapman (2020) note has become a topic of considerable academic debate because of its evolving functions, diverse user experiences and broad societal impact. Rooted in Web 2.0 technologies, social media platforms have enabled users to not only consume but also create and disseminate content, fundamentally reshaping business practices and consumer engagement (Olanrewaju et al. 2020).

## Research methods and design

### Study design

The ability to understand and recognise one's own epistemological beliefs is crucial for ensuring the relevance of the study (Rehman & Alharthi 2016). This research is grounded in the interpretivist philosophy, a research paradigm that allows the researcher to interpret the world through the experiences and observations of the participants. The study employs a qualitative research design, using an interpretivist approach to explore the experiences and perspectives of participants regarding CI practices within public relations agencies, with a particular focus on social media usage. A cross-sectional time horizon is adopted, capturing data at a single point in time to examine the CI practices of PR professionals within a defined period.

### Research approach

As noted by Thanh and Thanh (2015), the researchers employing the interpretivist paradigm primarily collect qualitative data and utilise an inductive approach, through which they seek to identify patterns and themes within the data to develop a theory. This study is situated within the context of public relations agencies, where the social media strategies implemented by PR professionals are central to gaining competitive advantages. The research participants are drawn from a range of PR agencies, ensuring a broad spectrum of insights into practices across various management levels, including lower, middle and top management.

## Research strategy and sampling

Creswell (2021) asserts that qualitative research seeks to understand and explore the meanings underlying social and cultural dynamics within society. The process of conducting qualitative research involves formulating research questions, collecting data from selected participants, conducting inductive data analysis and interpreting the data findings.

The study population comprises of PR professionals with direct experience in implementing social media strategies. A non-probability snowball sampling method was used because of the challenges of accessing PR professionals, especially considering their demanding roles. The sample includes eight participants from various PR agencies. Although small, this sample provides a focused and an in-depth rich understanding of CI practices. The sample size was justified based on the accessibility and availability of appropriate participants.

## Data collection and analysis

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, a qualitative method that facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' views and experiences. The interviews were structured around a set of pre-determined questions derived from a comprehensive literature review, and this same set of questions was used consistently across all the eight participating agencies. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview data, which involved identifying patterns and common themes within the participants' responses. To ensure the validity of the data collection tools, the interview questions were aligned with established theories and frameworks of competitive intelligence. This approach adhered to best practices, with each participant being asked the same set of questions, thereby ensuring consistency and comparability across all interviews.

Thematic analysis was primarily employed to examine the data, with coding used to identify recurring themes and patterns. Additionally, some statistical analysis was conducted to complement the qualitative findings. This combined approach enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the data. The researcher engaged in an iterative process of refining the themes, which focused on three main areas: Competitive intelligence practices, the role of social media in PR and how PR agencies sustain a competitive advantage. While statistical analysis was applied, the primary emphasis remained on qualitative insights because of the small sample size.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the College of Business and Economics (CBE) Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg (Reference No. 2021SCiis032). All participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, and their participation was entirely voluntary. The study ensured the confidentiality

and anonymity of all participants, with strict measures in place to protect their personal data. It adhered to established ethical guidelines, including responsible data management and the avoidance of plagiarism or misrepresentation. Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences, and no physical, psychological, or emotional harm resulted from their involvement.

## Results

### Competitive intelligence

The study assessed eight South African public relations (PR) agencies to gain insights into how they utilise CI through social media to attain a competitive advantage. Although not exhaustive, the sample provided valuable perspectives from a cross-section of agencies. The research also traced the evolution of public relations in South Africa, illustrating its transformation from a predominantly social function to a strategic management discipline.

According to data collected during the study, four out of eight agencies interviewed were based in Gauteng, while three agencies were located in the Western Cape, and the remaining agencies operated nationally and internationally. Agencies with broader national and global operations reported experience across multiple contexts, including corporate, executive and international roles – particularly in the Middle East and Europe. Notably, some Western Cape-based agencies highlighted logistical and client-service challenges because of the centralisation of major PR hubs in Johannesburg.

The study found that a significant proportion of the agencies five out of the eight agencies (75%) had adopted CI practices in some form. Findings also revealed that there is no standardised terminology used for CI processes, as different agencies used various terms to describe their methodologies. Through thematic analysis of the interviews, several key themes emerged regarding how these agencies conceptualised and operationalised CI:

- **Collaboration and external partnerships:** These approaches suggest a reliance on external networks to enrich internal intelligence processes.
  - Agency 1 referred to CI as *Media Monitoring and Coverage Reports*, explaining that they collaborate with external monitoring firms to collect competitor data aligned with client briefs.
  - Agency 3 described a *Collaborative Strategy*, partnering with creative, monitoring and marketing agencies to collect and analyse competitive information for campaign planning.
- **Tool-based intelligence gathering:** Agencies employed digital tools and software to structure their CI efforts, illustrating a more structured and tech-enabled approach to CI.
  - Agency 4 used the term *Audit Intelligence*, leveraging keyword-based tools to pull relevant data.

- Agency 6 explicitly used the term *Actionable Intelligence*, relying on platforms like NetBase to decode and analyse competitor behaviour, particularly for product and service-specific insights.
- **Client-focused data analysis:** Agencies tied their CI processes directly to client needs, suggesting a reactive and tailored application of intelligence. These agencies tended to treat CI as a service feature rather than a standalone internal function.
  - Agency 7 focused on 'Share of Voice Data', tracking competitors' product visibility and market share over specific timeframes to inform the campaign strategy.
  - Agency 8 simply described their process as 'Data Collection', where research was conducted in response to specific client briefs.
- **Relationship-based intelligence:** One agency grounded its CI efforts in interpersonal networks, reflecting a less systematic, but potentially valuable form of intelligence gathering based on industry networks.
  - Agency 5 used the term 'Client Relations', gathering competitor's information through industry relationships and informal exchanges.

Agency 5, which accounted for 13% of the sample, had only partially implemented the practice of CI, while Agency 2, which accounted for 12%, had not implemented CI practices. Furthermore, the effectiveness of CI was found to be closely linked to the level of awareness, acceptance and the presence of a culture of competitiveness among decision-makers within the organisations. In cases where these factors were strong, the development of actionable intelligence contributed to a more sustainable competitive advantage.

Markovich et al. (2019) argued that when organisations actively develop actionable intelligence to inform decision-making, they are more likely to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. This assertion is supported by the findings of the current study, which revealed that 75% of the analysed agencies had adopted CI practices to varying degrees. The remaining 25% had either only partially implemented CI or had not adopted such practices at all. The effectiveness and value of CI within these organisations were found to be closely linked to the awareness and acceptance of CI by decision-makers, as well as the presence of a competitive organisational culture – factors that align with the existing literature in reinforcing the strategic role of CI in achieving long-term competitiveness.

This finding implies that, when discussing CI processes across agencies, it is important to clarify and understand the specific terminology being used by each agency to ensure clear communication. Furthermore, this finding agrees that the CI process has been presented differently by the authors. The CI process is typically divided into steps that depend on the aspects that the practitioners or professionals want to emphasise, such as collection, analysis, scanning and interpretation (De Almeida, Lesca & Canton 2016:1285).

The findings also revealed that CI activities varied significantly among agencies, depending on their strategic

approach and whether they outsourced their CI efforts. The structure of each agency, along with the individuals involved, played a key role in the application and utilisation of CI practices.




## Social media

The research findings demonstrated a relationship between social media presence and competitive advantage in the PR industry. Of the agencies analysed, 45% had an active social media presence, and these agencies directly attributed their competitive advantage to the use of social media – underscoring its growing influence in shaping public perceptions. An additional 33% employed a mixed strategy, integrating social media with other traditional methods, reflecting a recognition of the need for a diversified approach in PR. The remaining 22% did not utilise social media at all, indicating a potential area for future exploration or alternative strategy development.

The research also revealed that 62% of agencies had deliberate social media strategies tailored to their specific goals, indicating that there was no uniform approach to leveraging social media. Additionally, 25% of agencies outsourced their social media management to content producers, emphasising the importance of maintaining a consistent online presence. Agencies that outsourced also contracted media monitoring companies to analyse social media activities and track their competitors' trends, underscoring the significance of data analysis in optimising social media strategies.

According to Table 1: Social media process and activities, the research findings suggest that a significant portion of organisations, in the realm of public relations, agencies are actively engaging with social media to gain a competitive advantage. The use of social media to gather competitor's information implies a proactive approach to staying ahead in the market. Agencies analyse competitor's activities, identify

**TABLE 1:** Social media process and activities.

 What it is called?	 Process	 Activity
Social media tracking	Manually searching social media pages for information on competitors	<b>Reporting:</b> Share information with the client in the form of reports with insight on sentiment.
Benchmarking and researching	Research clients and competitors	<b>Develop content:</b> Compile content on competition to present to and advise the client.
Digital content	Follow social media conversations and narratives across the platforms	<b>Content creation and paid media:</b> Create social media content and generate paid social media ads from collected data.
Social media analysis	Conduct research on influencer campaigns by competitors	<b>Influencer marketing:</b> Develop and suggest influencers for client campaigns based on competitive data.
Social listening	Tracking all social media apps and searching for trending topics.	<b>Campaigns:</b> Align client campaign messaging with trends and social media activities.

emerging trends and position their clients strategically in response. Providing clients with advice on social media platform selection and usage adds value to the agency-client relationship. This goes beyond mere data gathering and positioning the agency as a strategic partner in the client's PR efforts. The findings suggest that leveraging social media is crucial for gaining a competitive advantage in the PR industry, primarily with a well-defined social media strategy that is imperative.

## Competitive advantage

The findings indicated that distinct attributes within the PR industry helped set agencies apart from their competitors. One agency identified a key advantage in its younger workforce, which possessed high levels of technological proficiency across various skills. This workforce's expertise in digital tools, platforms and communication technologies enabled the agency to stay ahead of industry trends and utilise emerging communication channels effectively.

The study found that one agency attributed its competitive advantage to having a younger workforce, describing its employees as technologically savvy and socially attuned. According to the agency, younger team members demonstrated strong competencies in social media trends, content creation, data analytics and digital marketing. Although the study did not define specific age groups, the reference to 'younger' employees emerged from the agency's self-description during the interview:

'We are a very young and thriving business because we have got very young, brilliant-minded, social-focused teams. We are always up-to-date with TikTok and social media and we are reading what is in the news and that is what makes us stand out from the others ...' (Junior PR Executive)

This finding suggests that newer or younger employees, as described by the agency, offer a fresh perspective on traditional PR practices and contribute to greater agility in a fast-paced, digital-first environment.

The findings revealed that agility, flexibility and contractual expertise are perceived as crucial attributes that contribute to a competitive edge among PR agencies. According to, a participant from Agency 2, the ability to remain agile in a fast-changing environment is a key differentiator:

'Because it is in the current space in the current era that things change rapidly. COVID-19, it has made a huge impact on a lot of businesses and how they operate. Our competitive advantage is that we can work on a contractual basis for any given client.' (PR Senior Specialist)

This statement illustrates the agency's emphasis on adaptability to external disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its strategic use of contractual flexibility to meet diverse client needs. These qualities not only enhance client satisfaction but also allow the agency to remain versatile and competitive in an evolving PR landscape.

The study also identified diversity and inclusivity as key attributes contributing to the competitive advantage of certain PR agencies. One agency, in particular, highlighted its all-female team as a significant advantage, stating, 'That draws in a lot of clients, as we meet the requirement for clients that want to empower women and support black-owned businesses'. This focus on diversity appears to resonate with clients who prioritise empowerment and inclusivity. Agencies that emphasise these values seem to foster stronger connections with diverse audiences, which is an important factor for effective communication in PR. Moreover, diversity within the team was perceived as a driver of creativity and innovation, challenging traditional industry norms and offering fresh perspectives that can enhance PR campaigns.

While these findings suggest that diversity and inclusivity contribute to competitive advantage, the research did not identify specific literature directly linking these attributes to measurable outcomes within the PR industry.

## Discussion

### Key findings

The findings highlight the importance of understanding and adapting to the unique challenges and opportunities presented by social media, as PR professionals must navigate this dynamic environment with agility and innovation. Several agencies emphasised the value of CI practices, with varying levels of implementation and terminology. For example, one agency noted the benefits of outsourcing CI processes, stating that it allowed them to access specialised expertise and reduce internal resource constraints. Reflecting on the importance of resource allocation, a participant from Agency 6 explained:

'We rely on external monitoring tools and services to keep up with competitor trends. This way, we can focus on delivering the right insights without stretching our team too thin.' (PR Director)

This external reliance on CI allows agencies to maintain a competitive edge while efficiently managing resources. While the use of CI practices varied across agencies, it was clear that those who embraced CI, whether internally or through outsourcing, benefited from enhanced agility in their decision-making processes. Moreover, agencies with a social media presence, such as Agency 1, attributed their ability to quickly respond to market shifts and client needs to their ongoing engagement with social media intelligence. As one participant from this agency noted, 'Being present on social media gives us the real-time data that we need to adjust our strategies quickly, keeping us ahead of the competitors'.

In sum, the findings underscore how PR agencies leverage social media and CI practices – often through outsourcing – to improve their responsiveness and innovation in a rapidly changing environment.

In addition, the research delved into the diverse perspectives and competitive landscape within South Africa's PR industry, emphasising the need for tailored strategies and nuanced approaches. The significant role of social media in gaining a competitive edge is evident with agencies employing diverse strategies to leverage these platforms effectively.

However, the findings also indicate a notable proportion of agencies opting not to outsource social media activities, suggesting a preference for internal management and control. Standardised frameworks for structuring social media departments underscore the evolving professionalism within the industry. This research highlights the imperativeness for PR agencies to embrace agility, flexibility and strategic expertise to maintain a competitive edge. By leveraging CI practices, harnessing the power of social media and understanding the nuances of the industry landscape, agencies can position themselves for success in the dynamic realm of PR.

### Strengths and limitations

The research revealed valuable insights from the participation of the PR professionals, while many of the aspects of the research approach were effective, some aspects would need to be reconsidered for future research, particularly the sampling of research participants. The researcher underestimated the nature and availability of PR professionals to commit to partnering in research studies, and the snowball sampling technique, which relies on participant referrals, did not increase the sample of the research participants, as a result restricting perspectives and insights.

### Method limitations

While qualitative research is effective in uncovering patterns and fresh perspectives during the exploratory phases of a study, it is inherently limited by its non-statistical nature. This methodology relies on semi-structured or unstructured approaches to gather non-numerical data, which may result in findings that are subjective and difficult to generalise. Additionally, the insights produced are primarily focused on answering the 'why' of a phenomenon, potentially overlooking broader statistical trends that quantitative methods could illuminate. As a result, qualitative research may not provide a comprehensive picture of the studied phenomenon, limiting its applicability in certain contexts (Ugwu & Eze 2023).

### Sampling limitations

One of the major limitations of this study was limited generalisability, as it considered that the sample does not represent multiple agencies across all the provinces in South Africa. Therefore, the findings derived from this study may be limited in insight. By excluding agencies from other provinces, the study overlooks potential variations in PR practices, strategies and challenges that may exist elsewhere. The study's focus solely on PR agencies presents a limitation to the breadth of insights obtained.

### Recommendations for future research

Public relations agencies often collaborate and intersect with various other industries such as marketing, advertising, media and corporate communications. By not considering agencies from these related sectors, the study did not understand the interdisciplinary dynamics and synergies that shape contemporary communication practices comprehensively. Factors such as size, reputation, clientele and specialisation can vary widely among agencies. By only including a subset of agencies, the study presents a gap for future research. The nature of this study was academic, which is confined to a set period. A longer-term study will yield more results that can also address the gap in the involvement of more PR professionals.

An area of research to consider when studying CI and its use in PR is artificial intelligence (AI). Given the findings of outsourcing CI practices in the PR industry that is done by agencies, future research can investigate how AI enables CI activities as well as its impact on social media to gain competitive advantage. Research can explore how AI-powered tools automate the collection and analysis of vast amounts of social media data. These tools can track brand mentions, sentiment analysis and competitor activities in real time, providing CI professionals with timely insights.

Artificial intelligence can analyse historical social media data to predict future trends, helping organisations anticipate shifts in consumer behaviour or industry dynamics. Research could focus on the methodologies used for predictive modelling and their accuracy in different contexts. By simulating various competitive scenarios based on social media data, AI can help organisations develop strategic responses. Future studies could examine how scenario planning using AI impacts decision-making in PR and CI.

Future research into the role of AI in CI within the public relations industry presents numerous avenues for exploration. By focusing on automation, predictive analytics, decision-making enhancement, content personalisation, influencer engagement and ethical considerations, scholars and practitioners can develop best practices that leverage AI to gain a competitive advantage through social media. This future research outlook will not only contribute to the academic field but also provide practical frameworks for organisations seeking to navigate the complexities of today's digital landscape effectively.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasised the pivotal role of CI and social media in enabling PR agencies to maintain a competitive advantage within South Africa's rapidly evolving market. As the industry shifts towards digital content creation and strategic brand messaging, many agencies highlighted the necessity of CI practices as essential for enhancing their campaigns, especially in an environment where cost-cutting measures and technological changes are

reshaping traditional PR methods. For instance, Agency 6 shared their reliance on external monitoring tools to provide real-time competitor analysis, which allowed them to adjust strategies swiftly. Similarly, Agency 1 attributed their social media presence as crucial for obtaining timely insights into market trends, enabling them to stay ahead of competitors.

The research also highlighted the growing trend of outsourcing CI processes as a strategic choice among several agencies. Many found that outsourcing allowed them to access specialised expertise without overburdening internal resources. For example, Agency 6 benefited from external tools that facilitated the efficient gathering and analysis of competitor data, enabling them to make informed decisions without straining their internal capacity.

Additionally, the findings revealed a diverse landscape within the South African PR industry, with both larger agencies, often affiliated with advertising firms, and smaller, niche agencies coexisting. Larger agencies, like Agency 2, operated with broader client bases and integrated multiple strategies, while smaller firms tended to offer more focused, personalised services. One participant from a niche agency noted that their strength lay in their ability to respond swiftly to client needs, leveraging their agility and specialised expertise. This segmentation in the industry underscores the importance of tailoring strategic approaches to meet the specific demands of clients, with larger firms focusing on wider market outreach, whereas smaller agencies excelling in delivering targeted, high-touch services.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article. The author, C.J.P.N., serves as an editorial board member of this journal. The peer review process for this submission was handled independently, and the author had no involvement in the editorial decision-making process for this manuscript. The authors have no other competing interests to declare.

O.N. is the corresponding author who undertook the primary responsibility for the conception, design and execution of the research, including data collection, analysis and interpretation. O.N. also authored the manuscript

and oversaw the submission process. W.D., as the second author and co-supervisor, provided guidance on the research. C.J.P.N., the third author and co-supervisor, offered input throughout the research process.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, O.N., upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

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