

An Assessment of Social Media Opportunities in Public Relations Practice at University K and St Paul Universities in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

To ensure adequate public relations in the 21st Century, universities have turned to Social Media in service delivery. Despite the availability and utilization of social media tools, there is still limited understanding of the social media possibilities, especially WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, that private universities in Kenya have not fully harnessed for public relations. This study evaluates the public relations social media opportunities that University K and St. Paul Universities in Kenya have not yet taken advantage of. This research took place from May to July 2022. A mixed methods approach was employed, incorporating a questionnaire and interviews. It involved 270 questionnaire respondents and two in-depth interviews with PR officers from the two selected universities. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v. 23, while qualitative data were analyzed using narrative analysis. The results indicated that social media positively affected service delivery within the Public Relations departments. It was also disclosed that social media aided in promoting their accomplishments, improved information quality, established a user-friendly platform for the public to interact with their organization, increased access to information, and strengthened the organization's lobbying capacity for public backing of their stances. The research suggests that universities should take advantage of the ample opportunities social media offers to engage with their audiences and assist organizations in expanding their reach for public relations efforts.

Keywords: *social media integration, digital communication strategies, organizational engagement, optimizing social media, higher education.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media includes online abilities, activities, or communities individuals utilize to create concepts and exchange opinions, insights, expertise, and perspectives with everyone (Rijal, et al., 2024). The tools include social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook and micro-blogging platforms like Twitter (Koç & Akbiyik, 2020). Social media provides a means for communication to flow between the public and the organization, resulting in two-way communication.

Public relations practice serves as a crucial link between organizations and the public. Public Relations professionals are given a unique opportunity to collect

information, assess public opinion on various matters, and engage their audiences in direct conversations about different topics through the Internet (Al Haded, et al., 2024). The expansion of the internet in the 21st century continues to be a significant advancement in media. For the organization to thrive, it is crucial to consider the viewpoints of essential stakeholders, such as investors, customers, stakeholders, employees, and other publics within the organization's network.

Experts and researchers in communication have highlighted the importance of creating and executing social media strategies (Jeswani, 2023). As a result, enhancing and comprehending virtual communication through social media channels in PR remains indispensable in the current landscape (Alper, 2024). Shi (2022) highlighted the significance and worth of two-way communication in developing reciprocal understanding between the public and organizations, both externally and internally.

Consequently, given this context, numerous higher education institutions, including private universities, have utilized social media for their communications; however, the potential of social media in connection to Public Relations Practice has not been sufficiently and empirically explored in Kenya (Kwamboka, 2024).

Contemporary Public Relations Professionals are tasked with creating strategies and executing the methods on numerous platforms to meet the requirements of their audiences. As technology and globalization advance, the functions of Public Relations Professionals and the significance of social media also change.

The utilization of social media is continuously increasing among both organizations and the public. Moreover, 79% of business and management entities employ social media (Nayak, et al., 2020). Additionally, a recognized accomplishment of social media utilization in investor relations (Hannoka, 2023). Furthermore, it enhances the public relations objectives of government agencies through social media, particularly Facebook.

Previous research in Kenya has confirmed that social media can induce transformations in public administration, improve information dissemination, and improve service provision. Specifically, Dodds et al. (2023) recognized the internet's influence in altering the power dynamics between an organization and its audiences, thereby ensuring a balanced two-way communication of information.

Although organizations have access to social media platforms, there is limited understanding of the opportunities these platforms present for Public Relations. However, even within the realm of higher education institutions (from initial research), various businesses in Kenya have accounts of differing usage of social media in Public Relations. These setups called for a study to reveal the general possibilities social media can provide to private universities regarding public relations.

To comprehend the problem described above, the researchers aimed to address one research question: What social media opportunities about WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter use do Kenyan private universities have yet to exploit in terms of public relations practice?

This research focused specifically on evaluating the possibilities of utilizing social media in Public Relations. In comparison to the limitations, the study was clearly constrained in relation to the content since it only concentrated on three social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter). It is reasonable to expect that in organizations, especially in higher education institutions, there are likely similarities between traditional and modern media forms of communication. Therefore, it would be more rewarding to address both forms of media.

Additionally, this paper focused solely on two private universities (University K and St Paul University). It might have been more informative to gain insight into the social media opportunities presented by social media in other higher education institutions. Additionally, the research was confined to the Nairobi metropolitan area regarding context. Once more, it could have been beneficial to include additional private universities within the nation. Therefore, it is essential to clarify that the constraints outlined in this study were inevitable in academic research, which is inherently restricted by time and resources. This arrangement required a restricted approach, context, and scope of content. Nonetheless, the thoroughness in reaching the chosen scope was sufficiently extensive to guarantee that the study results were academically viable.

LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The current literature, nonetheless, has primarily been written from the Western viewpoint with limited journal articles focused on clear-cut areas of the world as well as the Central European backgrounds (Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009) disregarding Public Relations practice in higher learning institutions in Kenya. This paper thus, endeavors to fill the gap in the existing literature and gaze at inclinations precise to Kenya.

Social media is not an entirely new phenomenon in Kenya; it has enhanced communication within organizations since its emergence. The advancement of social media has reached its peak in introducing policies and regulations linked to everyday communication and public relations. However, there is limited knowledge regarding the potential of social media related to WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, which Kenyan private universities have not yet leveraged for public relations.

The objective is to utilize social media prospects in public relations inside organizations. Public relations professionals have been forced to use these platforms to connect with their audiences. Social media have, therefore, found their way not only into public universities but also into private universities in Kenya. This move was critical, especially after Kenyan professionals and scholars in communication studies emphasized the need to develop and implement social media strategies.

A study by Wright and Hinson (2009) examined social media applications by 574 PR US professionals. The survey findings indicated that public relations professionals considered search engine promotion the most significant, followed by blogs, social networking sites, video-sharing platforms, and message boards. The least regarded were social bookmarking and photo sharing. Moreover, another study conducted in the

United States showed that Public Relations professionals believe there is an impact when social media collaborates with traditional media in any capacity or otherwise. Social media is deemed a trustworthy way of sharing and transmitting information via conventional means (Altay, et al., 2024).

Lucas (2024) conducted a study on using new media in public relations. The findings from their research showed that public relations experts are progressively adopting social media in their roles. These new media tools generate unique prospects for PR professionals and strategic audiences. The results indicated that public relations professionals believed that social and various new media continually improved their accuracy, credibility, honesty, trustworthiness, and truthfulness. They consider these new media as effective watchdogs for traditional news outlets, influencing corporate and organizational transparency while promoting a culture of transparency and ethics.

Further, Scoble and Israel (2006) assert that there exist opportunities for organizations to seem extra human in online communication engagements through means similar to blogs. This is in line with the opinions of Andria, et al (2024) that interactions comprise communication discussion, and users gain increased control over the interactive communication process. Research reveals that a noteworthy percentage of Public Relations experts are persuaded that the content of the mainstream media is affected by blogs besides social media, as shown by Wright and Hinson (2008). This indicates that while the industry acknowledges social media's advantages, traditional media remains reliable and essential.

Agarwal & Puppala (2024) studied "PR practitioners' use of social media tools and communication technology." The findings showed that professionals have utilized almost six various social media platforms in their work. Furthermore, Contri, et al., (2023) studied Italian municipalities' targeting "Using Social media to engage citizens and specifically to examine how social media contributes to public engagement. The results concluded that municipalities used Facebook and Twitter to engage citizens; besides, there was a need for public administrations to move from a general isomorphic social media adoption to a thoughtful media strategy" (Guillarme, et al., 2024; Zaiats, 2024; Sarjito, 2023). Additionally, the emergence of new media has resulted in the expansion of PR practices (Abdullah, et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Samwel & Lando (2022) research on the effect of social media on PR in Kenya found that even with contests, for instance, internet inaccessibility, skills, and reliability, social media was being consumed. Up until then, the extant literature with regards to social media potential basically slopes in the direction of positive upshots over heightened communication among organizations' key public and organization. Incidentally, the literature demonstrates that social media is able to stimulate two-way communication among the public as well as their organizations.

Preceding research has demonstrated the potential of social media in bringing transformations or alterations in public management and the flow of information besides boosting service delivery. Specifically, El-Kasim (2020) admitted that there had been a power balance between the public and an organization because of social media,

to the magnitude of guaranteeing a two-way symmetrical information exchange between the organization and its public. Thus, Social media has enhanced and provided a leeway for unanticipated opportunities to involve the community in government responsibilities (He, et al., 2024).

Aydođan (2021) conducted a study in Turkey titled "Dialogic Communication During Covid-19 Pandemic: An Analysis on Technoparks' Social Media Usage in Turkey." The research aimed to explore how technoparks utilized social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) during the first three months of the Covid-19 pandemic to facilitate dialogic communication with stakeholders. The study employed content analysis of social media profiles maintained by 70 active technoparks, evaluating their engagement based on dialogic communication principles. Findings revealed that while technoparks extensively used social media for information dissemination, they largely failed to leverage dialogic features effectively, maintaining a predominantly monologic approach. This suggests that rather than fostering two-way engagement, social media management in Turkish technoparks remained focused on broadcasting information rather than encouraging interaction and dialogue (Aydođan, 2021).

In addition, Wilson and Supa (2013) explored the effect of Twitter on the public relations-journalist. The study adopted a questionnaire covering 340 journalists and 291 public relations practitioners. The results indicated that the benefits of Twitter as an information-sharing platform were recognized as necessary for journalism and public relations.

In another study, You and Kim (2013) examined the use of online newsrooms on U.S. state tourism websites. The study adopted a content analysis of 50 state tourism websites to investigate the availability of online newsrooms and their contents and overall usability. The results indicated that "the average number of social media use by the 50 state tourism offices is 4.04, and the most often used social media are Facebook (50 States), Twitter (49 States), YouTube (36 States), and Flickr (29 States)" (You and Kim, 2013).

To the continuing debate, social media use is on the upsurge amongst organizations in Kenya, instigating the need to embrace social media to improve Public Relations in public administration. Arief et al., (2022) points out that for social media to be successful in government, it ought to advance the department objectives, mission, social technology intentions, and department goals, in addition to the activities outlined.

As more forms of social media emerge, organizations adopt new communication techniques with their employees, the public, competitors, suppliers, investors, and stakeholders. Social media has been adopted from its inception by public relations; PR practitioners perceive social media positively with respect to strategic communication. However, the social media opportunities for WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter that Kenyan private universities have yet to exploit in public relations remain scanty, thus necessitating this study.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Mixed research enhances explanatory depth by combining numerical data with contextual insights, offering a multidimensional perspective on the phenomenon under study (Nuzirwan & Sukandar, 2024). The approach facilitates triangulation, which strengthens the validity of findings by merging distinct viewpoints (Adu et al., 2022). Quantitative data were obtained from students, while qualitative data were gathered from senior management overseeing public relations and communication.

The research was conducted at two private universities in Kenya—St. Paul University and University K—both located in Nairobi CBD. These institutions were purposefully selected due to their established public relations and communication departments, making them representative of higher education institutions in the region. According to Willie (2023), a target population refers to the total number of individuals, elements, or groups relevant to a study. Accordingly, this study targeted 270 students (drawn from a total of 1,500 students at University K and 1,200 students at St. Paul University) and two senior managers responsible for communication and public relations at these institutions.

The study utilized a combination of purposive and stratified sampling to ensure both representation and relevance. Stratified sampling was employed for student respondents, ensuring equal participation across faculties and academic years, thus enhancing inclusivity. Meanwhile, purposive sampling was used to select senior public relations managers as key informants due to their subject-matter expertise (Ahmad et al., 2023). A well-structured sampling frame enabled random selection, strengthening sample representativeness and improving research reliability (Siegel & Wagner, 2022). Furthermore, a structured sampling framework reduced sampling errors, minimizing selection biases and enhancing data accuracy (Bruce et al., 2024).

To determine the appropriate student sample size, a 10% proportional selection method was applied, yielding a final sample of 270 students from both institutions. This approach balanced generality with depth, ensuring that the study captured both broad patterns and nuanced insights.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. In-depth interviews were used to gather qualitative data from purposively selected senior managers in charge of public relations and communication. This method was particularly useful in eliciting deep insights, attitudes, and perspectives on public relations practices (Thomas & Earthy, 2023). Interviews allowed respondents to share nuanced opinions on how social media influences university public relations strategies (Assegaff et al., 2024).

On the other hand, structured questionnaires were administered to student respondents. As key users and recipients of social media-based public relations strategies, students provided diverse perspectives on its effectiveness. The

questionnaire method was chosen for its efficiency, reliability, and validity in obtaining standardized responses aligned with the study's objectives.

Data analysis followed a systematic and descriptive approach, leveraging both statistical and narrative methods. Quantitative data were processed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. Findings were presented through tables and bar graphs to illustrate social media's role in public relations strategies. Meanwhile, qualitative data were analyzed using narrative analysis, drawing insights from empirical literature to contextualize findings. This analytical approach ensured that interpretations were directly aligned with research objectives.

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutional authorities prior to data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants to ensure voluntary participation while safeguarding their rights (Isaselo & Tarimo, 2024; Kim, 2024). Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process, with personal identifiers excluded to protect respondent privacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first objective that guided the research was to assess social media opportunities about WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter that Kenyan private universities have yet to exploit in public relations.

Table 1 Response Rate for the Two Institutions

Institution	Responses		
	Actual responses	Non-responses	Total
St. Paul	119 (44.1%)	1 (0.4%)	120 (44.4%)
University K	150 (55.6%)	0 (0.0%)	150 (55.6%)
Total	269 (99.6%)	1 (0.4%)	270 (100.0%)

For this study, the researcher administered 270 questionnaires to the respondents from two Universities: University K (150) and St Paul University (120). The table above shows the distribution of respondents.

Social media opportunities by Select Kenyan Private Universities in terms of public relations

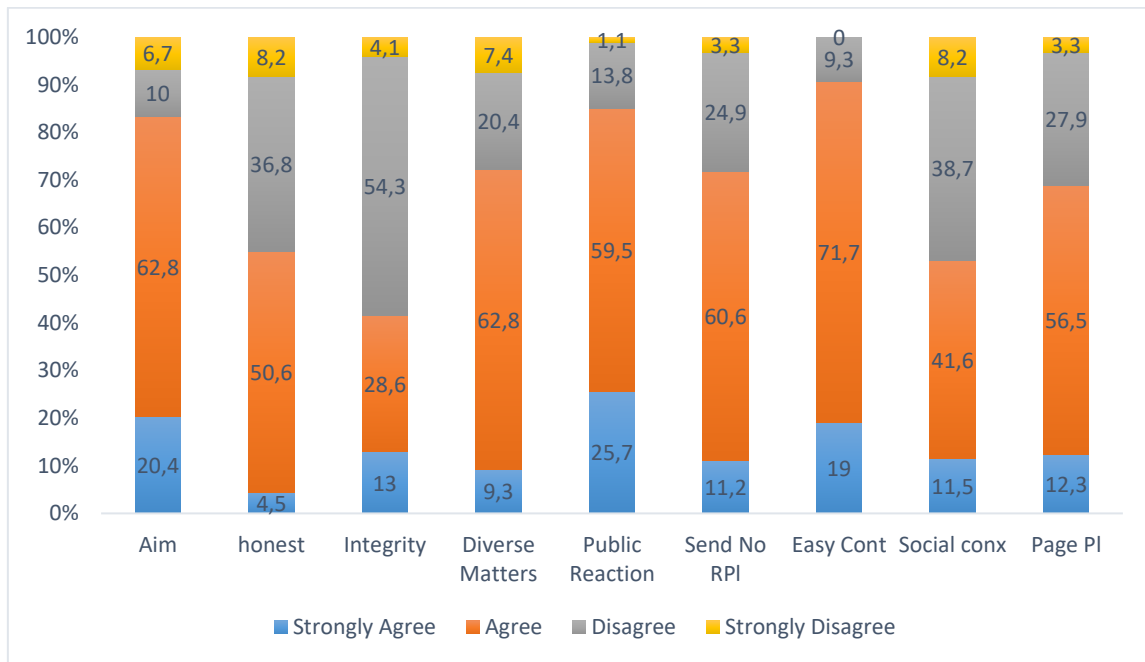


Figure 1 Agreement on Facebook Use.

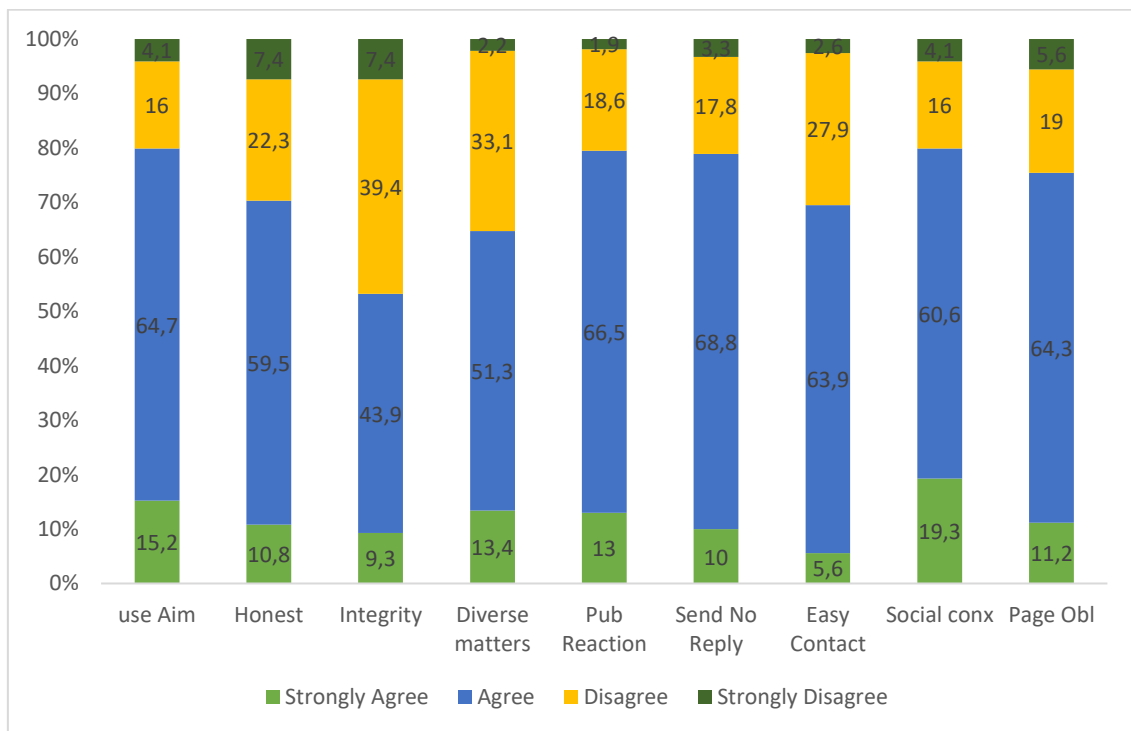


Figure 2 Agreement on Whatsapp Use

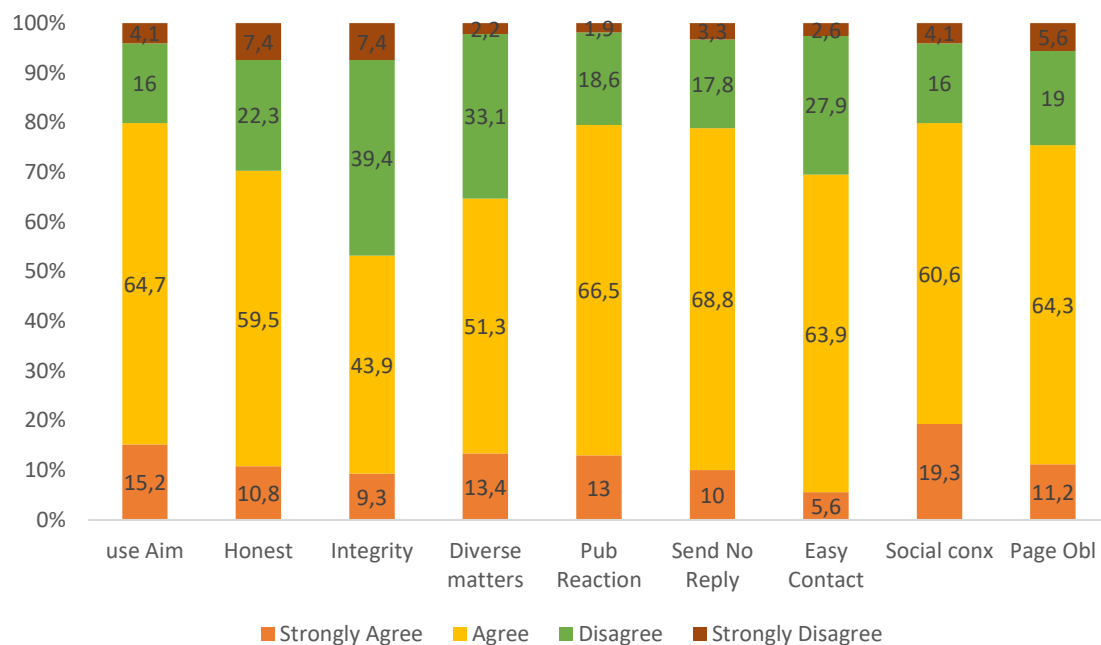


Figure 3 Agreement on Twitter Use.

In this study, social media opportunities that St. Paul Universities and University K have yet to exploit in terms of public relations practice were advanced from the viewpoint of benefits that can be gained by organizations exploiting social media. Data for this research question was sought (through social media, virtual social connections have been developed). Overall, based on the findings presented in the above-mentioned section, From figures (4.7, 4.8, and 4.9), we established that the questionnaires sent via Twitter and WhatsApp appealed to the majority of respondents (79.9%) besides Facebook appealing to (53.1%) respondents. Hence, an indication that the respondents tended to use WhatsApp and Twitter coherently in assisting the public in developing virtual social connections with the organizations.

As identified during data analysis, this issue on social media opportunities attracted much focus from the PR practitioners' perspective in qualitative data. The results demonstrated that a majority of the respondents felt that through social media, there is a development of virtual connection between the organization and its public, which the researcher deemed an ideal opportunity for social media. This agrees with Trammell's (2006) findings that social media is valued since it offers an additional way to contact the public. Additionally, Kent and Taylor (1998) acknowledged the prospective of establishing connections via the net, describing it as the "dialogic communication medium" (p.331). Thus, this boils down to an insinuation that an organization defines the extent to which it exploits social media opportunities irrespective of the platform used in engaging its public.

From an in-depth interview with the senior management in charge of communication and PR from the two institutions, the study reveals that the public

relations practitioners from both institutions valued the improved popularity and the institution's reach. Bearing that St Paul University's and University K's social media platforms appealed to most respondents, as those were the only online means of reaching their organizations, it is apparent that both institutions relished greater prominence after social media use. Both institutions may be required to evaluate the potential opportunities and means of engaging via social media. The two interviewees specified that social media use had the possible advantage of enhancing public relations practice. This tendency seems to repeat as a leeway that the two interviewees from University K and St. Paul University used social media in their daily activities with the public. St. Paul University describes such a replication as follows:

"Social Media has a positive influence on the PR practice of public relations. They have the potential benefit of enhancing PR practice, where the number of the public depends on the information communicated regarding the organization. "

Furthermore, based on in-depth interviews with the senior management responsible for communication and PR at the two organizations, the research indicates that utilizing social media in their communication is especially effective for engaging their audiences on diverse matters. This aligns with the findings of Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) and Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005), who noted that various organizations utilize social media to enhance connections with their audiences. Furthermore, it was revealed that University K participates more actively in PR efforts via social media. This was because University K had more human resources associated with digital media operations and media affairs, such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, with roles related to digital media operations in contrast to St. Paul University.

Another key finding worth discussing further is the issue of public engagement. It emerged that St. Paul University and University K heightened public engagement. Even though such an engagement was not strengthened to the best, the public's needs were often not met nor addressed fully. Further, the interviewees highlighted the following as critical in enhancing PR practice: seminar attendance, organizing workshops, conference attendance and participation, having meetings now and again, campaigns to educate the public, partnering with other PROs from different organizations, and improving content in PR. The research agrees with Grunig (2009) that if public relations officers exploited social media to its broad potential, it could offer them an additional collaborative, wide-reaching, strategic, as well as socially responsible two-way method of communication.

CONCLUSION

This paper has assessed social media opportunities in Public Relations Practice in Kenya. The study reveals that social media provides Public Relations with a platform for

communication, such as online meetings, sharing of ideas, research, connections, training on varied issues, dialogue, and improving feedback between the organization and the public.

Concerning the potential of social media in public relations practice in Kenya, the two universities should take advantage of social media's numerous opportunities to maintain regular communication with the public. Moreover, they ought to utilize social media to promote their courses to their audiences and build a robust network for potential connections to gain significant recognition and foster a positive relationship with the public. Therefore, fully utilizing social media tools will assist organizations in expanding their reach for Public Relations efforts.

Drawing from the results of this study, we recommend that additional research be carried out from an external viewpoint on social media preferences, the cost of social media, response rates on social media, and the use of social media in public universities.

BIODATA

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