

A study to examine the role of social media  
within public relations

By  
Elaine O'Neill

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the MA in  
Journalism and Public relations

August 2019

**Declaration**

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the MA in Journalism and Public Relations, is my own; based on my personal study and/or research, and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation. I also certify that I have not copied in part or whole or otherwise plagiarised the work of anyone else, including other students.

Signed: *Elaine O'Neill*

Dated: 01/08/2019

## **Abstract**

Social media quickly became popular since its introduction over a decade ago. It was quickly adapted into society and has changed how we act and interact with others. Not only has it changed how we interact as individuals it has changed how businesses and consumers interact with each other. It has provided a new tool for public relations practitioners to communicate directly with their audiences. However, as social media is a relatively new tool for businesses it is important to examine how and why it is used within companies.

This study set out to examine what the role of social media is within public relations by examining how companies used their social media accounts, what content they posted and examining the opinions and uses of social media among public relations professionals. The research questions addressed in this study are:

1. What is the role of social media within public relations?
2. Is the pattern of social media use consistent across these different businesses and participants?
3. Is third party media coverage and 'word of mouth' communication still important to companies and consumers?

The study followed a mixed methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative research. To collect this data an online analysis (content and engagement) of three companies social media accounts was conducted followed by two interviews with public relations and communications professionals and a further survey among seven other public relations and communications professionals.

The results of this research indicated that social media is used within public relations for relationship building, two-way communication, reputation management, content control and word of mouth communication.

**Keywords:** Public relations, social media, the role of social media, mixed methods, content analysis, engagement analysis, interviews, survey, relationship building, word-of-mouth, professionals' opinions, audience engagement

### **List of figures**

**Figure 1: Company A - Content analysis**

**Figure 2: Company A - Engagement analysis**

**Figure 3: Company B - Engagement analysis (Campaign vs Campaign Challenge)**

**Figure 4: Company B - Views on Instagram video**

**Figure 5: Company C - Content analysis**

**Figure 6: Survey response - Managing negative comments**

**Figure 7: Campaign Retweets - Engagement analysis**

**Figure 8: Campaign Challenge Retweets - Engagement analysis**

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my supervisor, Aoife O'Donnell, for always being available to meet, offer her help and providing her advice and guidance throughout this process. Your support not only throughout this research but throughout the year is really appreciated and will not be forgotten.

Thank you to the interview and survey participants who agreed to take part in this study and assisted in the completion of this research.

I would like to thank my family for always being supportive and making it possible for me to attend and complete not only this Master's degree but the last four years of college altogether. Thank you for believing in me and my abilities and helping me in achieving my goals and future career.

To Neil for putting up with my high stress levels and more than one breakdown over the last few months. Your patience and understanding has helped me so much throughout this past year and throughout this research.

Finally, to the Griffith girls who made this year an unforgettable experience and providing a constant support system for each other whenever it was needed.

## Contents

Declaration .....	1
Abstract .....	2
List of figures .....	3
Acknowledgements .....	4
Contents .....	5
Chapter one: Introduction .....	7
Chapter 2: Literature review .....	10
2.1 Introduction .....	10
2.2 Social media usage in society .....	12
2.3 Social media usage in business .....	17
2.4 Social media usage in the public relations profession .....	19
2.5 Conclusion .....	26
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	29
3.1 Introduction .....	29
3.2 Research Sample and Setting .....	33
3.3 Research Methods .....	33
3.3.1 Content analysis .....	33
3.3.2 Engagement analysis .....	35
3.3.3 Interviews .....	36
3.3.4 Survey .....	37
3.4 Ethics and challenges .....	38
3.5 Limitations .....	39
3.6 Conclusion .....	40
Chapter 4: Results and analysis .....	42
4.1 Introduction .....	42
4.2 Everyday use of social media .....	42
4.3 Relationship building .....	43
4.4 Two-way communications .....	52
4.5 Reputation management .....	56
4.6 Content control .....	58
4.7 Word- of-Mouth communication .....	59

4.8 Discussion and recommendations.....	64
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	69
References .....	73
APPENDIX I - Interview questions .....	79
Appendix II - Survey Questions .....	81
Appendix III – Consent Form example.....	84
APPENDIX IV .....	88
APPENDIX V .....	95
APPENDIX VI .....	104
APPENDIX VII .....	104
APPENDIX VIII .....	104

## **Chapter one: Introduction**

Social media plays a huge role in society today. Social media quickly became popular since its initial appearance in the early 21st century (Edosomwan et al, 2011). Over the last decade, social media was quickly adapted into society and now plays an important role in our everyday lives. In Ireland alone, 72% of people admitted to accessing the internet to use social media networks (CSO, 2017). It has become an integral part of our lives and even plays a ritualistic role in our everyday actions. Social media has changed our behaviours and evolved how we interact with others. It has changed how we receive information about other people, events and current affairs. Users grew to enjoy how social media allowed them fast access to information and they also began to like how they could receive information and interact with companies (Kaul & Chaudhri, 2015).

As social media became more and more important to the individual and how they shared and received information, it began to become an important tool within business. There are many advantages that social media as a tool has for companies particularly as a communication tool as it offers instant and constant two - way communication between companies and their audiences. It offers businesses a more direct and instant way to communicate information with their consumers.

Public relations professionals are being increasingly relied on to generate good publicity for their companies and clients as promotion has begun to play an important role in business (Aronczyk, Edwards and Kantola, 2017). PR professionals rely on earned media as they do not pay for media coverage. Traditional media sources such as newspapers and television provided mediums in which to gain earned media. This has



meant that the journalist and the public relations professional created a mutually beneficial working relationship. However, with the introduction of social media to the business world, public relations professionals were provided with a new way to share information directly with their audience and the public. Social media allows professionals to decide which content is shared and when this content is shared. Social media has also provided public relations professionals with a direct way to monitor their reputation, manage their relationships, handle a crisis and negative comments.

However, it is important to note that although social media allows businesses and public relations practitioners to communicate directly with their audiences, the importance of media coverage from traditional media sources has not diminished. The importance of word-of-mouth communication has always been important for businesses and services and has even adapted to social media.

This research set out to determine what the role of social media is within public relations by examining how three companies used their social media and what content they shared to it. This research also set out to determine the uses and opinions of social media among public relations practitioners and to determine if unbiased third-party communications such as word-of-mouth communications are still important to companies and consumers.

This research used a mixed methods methodology. This approach combined both qualitative and quantitative research to create a stronger end conclusion. The qualitative research engaged with was used to examine what content businesses used their social media accounts to share and how public relations professionals used and thought about

social media. Quantitative research was used to examine how this social media content was received among these three company's social media audiences and if various public relations professionals used social media in the same ways. This research also aimed to determine if unbiased, third party media coverage is still important to companies and consumers.

To collect this data, an online analysis (content and engagement) of each social media post shared by these companies over a period of three months across three different social media platforms was collected followed by a collection of each posts engagement levels. Data was also collected through interviews with two public relations and communications professionals and a multiple-choice survey sent to several other public relations and communications professionals.

To follow is a literature review that analyses further the social media uses within society, social media uses within business and social media uses within the public relations profession. The methodology used and resulting findings are then outlined and discussed in the context of the research questions posed.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Public relations are defined as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.” (Public Relations Society of America, 2012). Public Relations traditionally relied on media sources “such as newspapers, magazines, and television programmes” (Stephen & Gallack, 2012, p625). Media coverage gained from these sources is referred to as earned media. “Marketing actions can help generate earned media activity, but marketers do not directly generate the activity” (Stephen & Gallack, 2012, p625) Marketing and PR professionals can create content and send out press releases to try gain media coverage but it becomes earned media when a third-party source decides to publish the information. Earned media is important to public relations because it is not paid for and it is trusted because it is not coming directly from the source that wants this information to be heard. The fact that the information is coming from an impartial party is also important ‘because humans obtain the bulk of their information on any topic from other sources’ (Brody, 2003, p37). “Central to the practicing public relations and the process of creating the media’s news agenda is a productive working relationship between journalists and public relations professionals” (Pincus et al, 1993, p27). Journalists need public relations practitioners to provide them with press releases and news content while public relations practitioners need journalists to gain publicity for their brand, company or client (Pincus et al, 1993, p28). However, social media has provided public relations professionals with a brand-new communications tool capable of reaching their audiences directly rather than through a third-party source.

Boyd and Ellison define social media “as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). Social media became extremely popular at the beginning of the 21st century with the creation of many social networking sites from the year 2000 onwards, such as MySpace, LinkedIn, Facebook and many more (Edosomwan et al, 2011). “In December 2011, 1.2 billion users worldwide - 82 percent of the world’s Internet population over age 15 - logged onto a social media site” (Dijck, 2013, p4). As social media became more popular, it transformed how people communicated and in turn, transformed how businesses communicate.

With the growing importance of social media in people’s personal lives, “social media has also played a vital role in transforming business and communications” (Edosomwan et al, 2011, p1). Businesses have a new tool that allows them to communicate information directly with their audience, engage in two-way communication and build long lasting relationships with their audiences (Papazolomou & Melanthiou, 2012). Within public relations specifically, the emergence of social media has provided professionals with a new non-paid form of communication. “The media landscape has dramatically changed, with social media outlets (SMOs) such as blogs, online discussion forums, and online communities now supplementing traditional media outlets (TMOs)” (Stephen and Galak, 2012, p624). Public relations professionals still rely on these traditional media outlets for media coverage however with the emergence of social media there is a whole new set of ways to get information published.

The literature review will discuss how the introduction and growing popularity of social media has affected social media usage in society, social media usage in business and social media usage in the public relations profession. This chapter will analyse social media use within these three areas in more detail. All the information for this literature review was gathered from secondary sources using databases such as EBSCO, SAGE, Google Scholar and the Griffith College Library.

## **2.2 Social media usage in society**

In 2008, David Phillips claimed that the online future was a future about relationships between people, groups and organisations (Phillips, 2008). Over ten years later, that statement could not be more true. “Social media is the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration” (WhatIs.com, 2019). Social media allows for relationship building and creating communities through online communication whether it be with friends, family, public figures or companies. As social media began to grow in popularity, David Phillips examined the psychology behind why social media has become such a big part of people’s lives and relates it back to the fact that people are desperate to fit in and “humans fade when excluded from their fellows” (Phillips, 2008, p79). Through social media, people can find and connect with online communities both nationally and internationally, this means that if someone doesn’t fit in among their local community, they can easily access social media and find people they can connect with. As social media became more important to people it begun to influence “various aspects of both individuals’ lives and society as a whole” (Khang, Ki and Ye, 2012, p279). In 2017 in a survey on internet usage in Ireland, 72% of the respondents stated

using the internet to access social media (CSO, 2017). Social media has gradually become an integral part of our everyday personal lives, work lives and social lives. As social media became more and more important in our everyday lives our “expectations, values, behaviours, and interactions have thus changed” (Theunissen, 2015, p. 10). “These technologies have changed us. They have given us potential for communication and interaction that we did not previously possess” (Miller et al, 2016, p1). Theunissen states that people who knew life before the internet notice these changes more because “we no longer print and send photos to friends and family but rather invite them to our Facebook pages. Reading newspapers over coffee is seen as a quaint habit; everyone else reads the news on their mobile devices. Party invites are sent by text or Snapchat rather than a formal handwritten or printed invitation, and it is seen as ‘ignoring, if a Snapchat participant reads the messages but doesn’t respond” (Theunissen, 2015, p. 10). We are now living largely digital lives and social media usage has become a ritualistic part of everyday life. “When the study of the internet began people commonly talked about two worlds: the virtual and the real. By now it is very evident that there is no such distinction - the online is just as real as the offline. Social media has already become such an integral part of everyday life that it makes no sense to see it as separate” (Miller et al, 2016, p7).

Perhaps one of the reasons social media has begun to play such an important role in everyday life is the fact that it is extremely accessible. Social media can be accessed from a multitude of devices and the average person can use social media without IT knowledge (Varbanov, 2015, p. 22). Another possible reason for its popularity is that social media is, for the most part, free of charge. Social media accounts can be created

for free with a valid email and there is no charge for posting content such as statuses, pictures and sharing other content. Content can be easily created and posted for free using computers, laptops, tablets and mobile phone applications. Social media users can use social media solely to gather and read information, see other user's status updates or pictures or view popular images and videos. Users do not necessarily have to post their own content, they can engage with and share other content to their social media pages. Again, users do not need to have an intricate knowledge of IT, they just need to have a decent understanding of how social media works to create good content. Photos can be taken for free on mobile phones, edited for free on social media and posted alongside a status quickly and easily, reaching audiences instantly.

Above we view people as social media users but, in this section, we will view them as consumers. Not only has the introduction of social media influenced how we gather information on other users and build relationships with them "the extension of promotion into new domains influences the ways we receive, understand, interpret and respond to information about organisations" (Aronczyk, Edwards and Kantola, 2017, p140). The expansion of social media as a new domain for gathering information has meant there has been a "growing trend and shift in consumer preference for the use of digital media" (Kaul & Chaudhri, 2015, p. 456). 84% of internet users around the world have social network accounts and each of these users spend an average of 2 - 4 hours online every day (Varbanov, 2015, p. 5). "The prevalence of promotional culture now means that audiences themselves use promotional techniques for their own identity and image management" (Aronczyk, Edwards and Kantola, 2017, p. 143). "Users have also embraced social media platform's numerous opportunities to disclose, self-promote, and

publicize” (Elmer, 2015, p. 1). This means that “organisations today address a ‘knowing’ audience, which demands authentic rather than instrumental communication” (Aronczyk, Edwards and Kantola, 2017, p.143). Social media users have become used to accessing information at a high speed which has made them more demanding consumers “(Barry et al, 2011).

“One-way communication is seen as manipulative” (Archer & Harrigan, 2016, p. 69). Therefore, it could be argues that with the growing role of social media, consumers may prefer the interactivity of social media and how “two-way communication has come to be seen as the dominant model for PR” (Archer & Harrigan, 2016, p. 69) via social media as well. Therefore, “balancing between control and trust is hence likely to be a crucial management challenge in the social-media context” (Rokko et al, 2014, p807) as consumers need to trust that although companies have control of their social media content, they are presented with accurate information. Social media allows two-way communication between brands and their audiences with direct communication through direct mails, comment sections and tagged posts. However, “the latest trend is for consumers around the globe to demonstrate a preference toward the use of social media in creating messages regarding brands and corporations as well as exchanging them through blogs, video sharing, forums, and social networks” (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012, p.320). A survey conducted by Bain & Company of over 3,000 consumers in 2011 “found that customers who engage with companies over social media spend 20% to 40% more money with those companies than other customers. They also demonstrate a deeper emotional commitment to the companies” (Barry et al, 2011).



“Hyper-connected individuals regularly broadcast their opinions. And they rely on their friends and social networks for news, reviews and recommendations for products and businesses” (Barry et al, 2011). Brands today can communicate with their audience through third-party voices such as bloggers, influencers and other public figures. Bloggers play an active role in presenting diverse viewpoints, generating and spreading popular rumours, and influencing public opinions on issues, events, and public figures” (Khang, Ki and Ye, 2012, p. 281). “The use of ‘mutual friends’ in the form of influencers (journalists, analysts, vloggers, bloggers, celebrities, chat show hosts) all produce a climate of engagement that is designed to be easy for audiences to accept and participate in” (Aronczyk, Edwards and Kantola, 2017, p. 145). “People do business with people they respect. Brands today must show their human side by participating directly with the people they want to reach in the networks where they’re active” (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009, p.39). This is another reason why bloggers and influencers etc. have become so “important for consumers as they are read for entertainment and information and are perceived as trustworthy” (Archer & Harrigan, 2016, p.68). Social media allows for more transparency between PR practitioners and their consumers as social media is expected to be “a democratising influence that allows true dialogue between organisations and publics” (Archer & Harrigan, 2016, p. 69) through direct mails, comment sections, tagged posts and many other aspects of social media. However, with bloggers and social media influencers rising in popularity, even though they are a new way for public relations practitioners to reach their audiences, it is important to note that communicating through these third parties has come with its disadvantages as well. “Bloggers have a substantial influence on their reader’s

behaviours” (Archer & Harrigan, 2016, p. 68) which is why companies want to gain the support and trust of these figures. Using these public figures can cause uncertainty for PR departments when trying to control bad publicity. A power and ethical struggle can occur in these work relationships between these personalities and practitioners. PR departments want to ensure that their organisation is getting good publicity however this can be uncertain when they are dealing with unpaid public figures. With the popularity of blogs increasing, money has become important to bloggers. They believe they should be paid for gaining the company significant publicity, but they also realise that receiving payment puts them in a position where they feel they must talk positively about the brand no matter what (Archer & Harrigan, 2016, p. 70). For those in PR they are placed in an unethical position in payment for endorsement. However, “PR practitioners continue to seek control in relationships to produce ‘valued outcomes’ and meet measurable objectives for the organisations they work for” (Archer & Harrigan, 2016, p.67/68). It is a new area in PR that people are still struggling to define, although bloggers or influencers are now required to state in their publications if they have been paid to promote something.

### **2.3 Social media usage in business**

“Social media platforms are becoming increasingly important for companies to engage with, delight and retain their best customers” (Barry et al, 2011). Although with the rise of digital media, the “online interactive nature of communication” (Phillips, 2008, p. 79) has become important within business. Social media has changed communication as a whole - be it for corporate communications or for media communications. In 2017, 69% of enterprises used social media in Ireland compared to 47% in the EU (CSO, 2017).

As social media became instrumental in the working world, businesses communication and marketing techniques were forced to adapt to this new form of communication which has benefitted both companies and consumers. “In terms of communication structure, social media has led to a dramatic shift from mass communication to interactive digital communication” (Mergel, 2012, p. 281). These evolving communication technologies and techniques have allowed for more interactivity between companies and consumers (Kaul & Chaudhri, 2015, p. 455). “With the emergence of social media, companies are now going beyond simply maintaining a website for basic transactional purposes and traditional promotion. They are rather finding new ways to interact with customers, in search of a more long-term relationship rather than a once-off sale relationship or one-way communication which most websites may be confined to” (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012, p. 319). Solis & Breakenridge state that social media provides us with a way to reach people directly and “through this process, you become part of the media paradigm and your communication and influence can become powerful” (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009, p. 45).

With the growth of social media as a tool within companies, the importance of social media training has grown. “Companies are at reputational risk if their processes and procedures for handling social media conversations and managing expectations are not well planned or their engagement with wider communities is not strategized” (Kaul & Chaudhri, 2015, p. 459). Therefore, knowing how to properly use social media is important to gain the full potential of what social media offers as a communication tool. Therefore, Kaplan and Haenlein suggest that “one possible approach involves defining groups of employees whose primary objective is the management of corporate Social

Media” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p66). These group of employees in charge of the social media accounts should be well trained in how to use social media, create content, monitor threads/discussions and know what content should and should not be posted. “Countless stories about ‘social media fails’ serve as reminders that social media events staged by organizations — hinging on concepts of consensus and mutuality with publics—are precarious at best” (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015, p.38). One example of such a social media fail is that of Nestlé. In 2010 Greenpeace published a video in which they stated their disagreement with how Nestlé produced their KitKat bars using palm oil (Antevenio, 2018). Instead of making a statement regarding the video, they removed and banned negative comments involving the crisis from being posted on their social media page (Antevenio, 2018). This was met with even more outrage and they then acted defensively and inappropriately in replying to comments (Antevenio, 2018). They eventually realised their mistakes and apologised however it was too late and their reputation was irreparably damaged (Antevenio, 2018).

#### **2.4 Social media usage in the public relations profession**

PR practitioners are being increasingly relied on to generate good publicity for companies as “promotion and consumption are no longer instrumental acts; they have become embedded in the way organisations construct their business” (Aronczyk, Edwards and Kantola, 2017). The public relations profession has grown in importance and forming an identity and relationship with consumers has become easier with social media as a tool. Online interaction has become so important that “public relations practitioners at several organizations have been dedicated as full-time social media directors” (Smith & Place, 2013, p. 175). However, for a long time “PR and marketing

have operated behind a wall, spamming media with generic emails and news releases” (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009, p. xx). Today “the work involved in paving the way for promotion is complemented by practitioners’ active management of interactions between organisations and their audiences on an ongoing basis” (Aronczyk, Edwards and Kantola, 2017, p146). Just one way of managing these interactions, as I have mentioned above, involves the mutually beneficial relationship between the journalist and the public relations practitioner. For years the journalist and the public relations practitioner have relied on each other. By working together, the public relations practitioner has provided press releases and information that the journalist is able to then turn into a news-worthy article (Mudd, 2013) This in turn benefits the public relations practitioner as it boosts their clients or company’s reputation (Mudd, 2013). Social media has also acted as a tool for the public relations practitioner to share said articles to their audiences (Mudd, 2013). Just as social media has provided a platform for PR professionals to share the news articles, etc. that has been written about them, it has also provided them with a platform to have more control over the content that does get shared to their audiences.

“Earlier it was limited to newspapers and a handful of editors as to what can possibly be communicated at large” (Brahma, 2018, p. 2). These news editors were thought of as gatekeepers and public relations practitioners needed these “gatekeepers to select and publish stories about or of concern to their clients” (Pincus et al, 2012, p28). Now with social media you can decide what content you communicate to the public and with the increasing importance of influencers it is easier to communicate with your desired audience and you don’t have to convince an editor to tell your story (Brahma, 2018). As

mentioned above, just as social media allows businesses to share content written about them by journalists (Mudd, 2013), they can also share the content that was not picked up and published by journalists by posting through their social media.

Another important way of companies gaining publicity is word-of-mouth communication. The fact that people gain a bulk of their information from other sources is again important here as “consumers obtain information that will have an effect on their purchase intention from various channels” (GÜRCÜ & Korkmaz, 2018, p2). They also say that purchasing some products or services may be more difficult for some consumers and that word-of-mouth communication is an important factor that affects consumer’s purchasing behaviour” (GÜRCÜ & Korkmaz, 2018, p2). “WOM is one of the oldest forms of marketing communication” (Ghosh et al, 2014, p.294. As social media evolved, word-of-mouth evolved with it and became known as eWom which “is any WOM communication facilitated by electronic means such as emails, instant messaging, blogs and social networking sites” (Ghosh et al, 2014, p295). Social media word-of-mouth communication allows users to share their opinion and information on products and services with others. Just as companies can share content written by journalists to their social media pages they can also share positive eWom content posted by other users to their pages for their audiences to see.

If a business wants to share or create content as mentioned above, the migration of business to social media has given businesses a tool to target audiences and reach a mass following instantly (Varbanov, 2015, p. 6). Companies can now communicate with a mass target audience at the push of a button due to social media. Businesses can build up their social media audience, target the specific communities or target

audiences they want to reach and can post content that will reach and be available to their mass audience instantly. As well as this, businesses do not necessarily have to target one specific geographic area as these audiences can be targeted and communicated with all over the world.

“Relationship management has been argued is the central concept for the PR profession” (Archer & Harrigan, 2016, p. 69) whether it be relationships within the company, with consumers or with those they want to promote their brand. “The internet is no longer only to find information; it is there to enable companies to more effectively engage in relationship building” (Papazolomou & Melanthiou, 2012, p.320). Social media can allow you to build a relationship and community with your desired audiences. The two-way communication provided to businesses through social media has become essential in building these relationships as it allows for direct communication between the company and the consumer. This is one reason why monitoring opinions through social media has become important to companies, they need to be a step ahead if a crisis occurs because “the rise of social media channels have become so powerful that today a crisis, once generated, needs to be addressed immediately” (Brahma, 2018, p. 3). If a crisis needs to be addressed, you can immediately communicate with your desired audience. A quick and strategized response to a crisis is important to repair, rebuild and keep the relationship that has been created between the company and consumer.

As mentioned above, 84% of internet users around the world have social network accounts and each of these users spend an average of 2 - 4 hours online every day (Varbanov, 2015, p. 5) which means that “as part of a broader customer engagement

strategy, social media can be an effective and cost-efficient marketing, sales, service, insight and retention tool” (Barry et al, 2011). This means that as an insight tool social media has become a resource undeniably helpful in gathering information about consumers. “Bain & Company research shows that the average Facebook user will ‘like’ no more than seven companies or brands” (Barry et al, 2011). This means that “to increase the odds of capturing valuable real estate on a customer’s wall, it is critical to know your target audience and understand which social media platforms they frequent, as well as the type of content and engagement they find most compelling” (Barry et al, 2011). Social media provides businesses with an information database into their consumers, their likes, their dislikes, what they are currently talking about and so much more. This helps in the relationship building process because companies can build a profile on the type of audience they have and want. They can use their likes, dislikes and current trends to create and target their audience with content they will engage with.

“Social media data is often described as providing unprecedented access to and insights into large-scale and highly detailed human behaviour” (Mergel, 2017, p. 493).

‘This ‘articulated’ network of confirmed contacts or follower relationships is accessible to researchers, who can use the number of followers, number of new followers, or number of times followers have shared content with their own network of connections” (Mergel, 2017, p. 492). This also means that once businesses have created and shared content with their target audience they can then use social media to see how that content was received by the audience through the number of likes, shares etc. Social media has also provided PR practitioners with “free analytics provided by social media platform



providers, such as the number of followers and the number of times a post was seen, as an indicator of the quality of and interest in a topic” (Mergel, 2017, p. 489). “Companies find it valuable to track the percentage of customers “engaged”—looking at such basic measures as site traffic, fans and followers” (Barry et al, 2011) as this allows companies to know and understand how well their social media content is being received and how much of an audience they are reaching.

“Reputation is arguably the single most valued organizational asset. Consequently, a positive and linear relationship exists between reputation and organizational success” (Gibson et al, 2006, p15). As social media grows “there is a growing emphasis on reputation management and reputation risk assessments in brand management” (Rokko et al, 2014, p803). “Reputation management involves creating and defending positive public perceptions” (Gibson et al, 2006, p16) and it is important to be proactive in reputation management to try to prevent a crisis or damage to a company’s reputation (Gibson et al, 2006, p15). Social media has become an extremely valued tool in managing the reputation of the company. “In these dynamic environments, practically anybody can search for, publish, and share information about brands, making it impossible for companies to control all conversations online” (Rokko et al, 2014, p803). Again, therefore monitoring opinions through social media has become important. Just as you can monitor likes, dislikes and trends you can monitor online discussions and the public’s general view or opinion of the company. Companies may not be able to control the conversations, but they can monitor them. “With the rise of social media as primary tools for communication, the mediating role played by traditional media between companies and publics has diminished. Instead, a company must monitor individuals’

comments regarding its products or services online 24/7” (Khang, Ki and Ye, 2012, p281). By monitoring these opinions companies can keep up to date with the general opinion and reputation of the company within the eye of the public.

It has also been argued that as well as advancing and increasing the importance of the public relations practitioner’s role “the viral environment involved in social media has therefore raised major concerns and challenges for public relations practitioners”

(Khang, Ki and Ye, 2012, p.281). Reputation management requires constant monitoring and planning rather than acting rashly when a crisis occurs (Gibson et al, 2006, p17).

Reputation management “succeeds only when operating holistically, not in the form of sporadic reactive procedures activated exclusively during emergencies but through ongoing influence upon corporate actions, behaviour and public communication”

(Gibson et al, 2006, p17). This means that companies have a tool that can allow them to be constantly active in managing the corporate reputation and that may allow them to foresee bad publicity or a crisis coming. If the company can see a crisis coming they can put a plan in place to counteract and address the bad publicity.

“People are discussing their brands, products, and services right now, across multiple forms of Social Media, with or without them” (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009, p. xix). “There is much evidence that social media can give unexpected power to unpredictable and unforgiving parties in organization–public relationships” (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015, p.38) and “because of the current media landscape in which anyone can instantly have a megaphone and access to millions of people, the goal of controlling information has become more challenging than ever” (Wigley & Zhang, 2011, p2). With social media, other users can reach a large audience to publish negative content about your brand or

organization. This negative content can come in various forms via social media such as “an unfavourable discussion thread, news feed, or the rapid spread of a viral video via online consumer-to-consumer networks” (Rokka et al, 2014, p806). Once a crisis is generated it needs to be addressed immediately. Wigley and Zhang state that once a crisis has occurred one of the key factors in successfully handling a crisis is to control the information being broadcast out by continuously getting your key messages out the public (Wigley & Zhang, 2011, p2). Social media has become an important tool when trying to control the output of information and key messages when handling a crisis as “social media offer channels for transparency and open, two-way communication” (Wigley & Zhang, 2011, p2). Once a crisis has occurred social media allows businesses or brands to instantly communicate with their consumers and can begin a discussion due to the two-way communication that social media offers.

One example of good social media use in a crisis is that of Southwest Airlines. When a Southwest airline flight landed nose first in LaGuardia, they confirmed that there had been an accident via social media and that they would continue to update people as more information became available (Fisher, 2016). People commented to praise how they immediately provided information on the crisis before third party media became aware of what had happened (Fisher, 2016)

## **2.5 Conclusion**

Evidence shows that social media has quickly become an important part of people’s everyday lives. Our lives have become largely digital as we have changed our behaviours and began to use social media for activities such as reading and sending invites (Theunissen, 2015, p. 10). Our online and real lives have merged as one (Miller

et al, 2016, p7). Research conducted throughout the literature review also shows that people have adapted to using social media so quickly as it is free and extremely accessible. It is easy to create, send and share content with your network of connections.

Social media use within businesses has created a new way to interact with audiences. There are a number of advantages of social media use within businesses as they create more long-lasting relationships with clients. Research showed that people as consumers began to like receiving and engaging with businesses via social media platforms and by engaging with these consumers, they are more likely to spend more money with your company (Barry et al, 2011). However, these relationships need to be maintained through proper use of social media on behalf of the company.

Users also began to engage more with bloggers and influencers as they provide a source of entertainment. They are useful to public relations practitioners as information shared by them is perceived as trustworthy (Archer & Harrigan, 2016, p68). However, a number of struggles have emerged for public relations professionals within this relationship as some bloggers and influencers began to believe they should be paid for gaining publicity for a company.

Although public relations practitioners traditionally relied on traditional media to gain publicity, social media has given content control back to public relations professional (Brahma, 2018) and allowed them to directly target and reach a mass audience instantly. Word-of-mouth communication has also always been important within marketing and public relations and evidence showed that as social media developed, WOM communication developed with it (Ghosh et al, 2014, p295).

The two-way communication that social media provides has allowed companies to actively manage relationships and their reputation by maintaining opinions and perceptions of their companies online. Evidence shows that people are discussing brands, products etc online whether the brand is involved in the conversation or not (Solis & Breakeyridge, 2009, pxix). A crisis can be generated quickly due to the interactivity of social media. However, social media, if used properly, can also allow public relations professionals to respond quickly and appropriately in times of crisis.

Throughout this research, these three areas, social media use in society, social media use in business and social media use in public relations are examined by analysing social media usage of three companies and by interviewing and surveying professionals about their social media uses and opinions.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The main objective of this research was to examine what the role of social media was within public relations. In order to do this, an online analysis (content & engagement) of three companies social media accounts was conducted. This analysis was conducted across each company's, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts over a period of three months. Interviews were also conducted with two public relations and communications professionals and finally a multiple-choice survey was sent to seven various public relations professionals. Overall, the research design was based on a mixed methods approach, involving both qualitative research and quantitative research. The aim of using mixed methods within this research was to determine the role of social media within public relations by examining three social media accounts and the opinion of working public relations and communications practitioners on their social media usage and the importance of social media.

The research questions addressed in this study were:

1. What is the role of social media within public relations?
2. Is the pattern of social media use consistent across these different businesses and participants?
3. Is third party media coverage and 'word of mouth' communication still important to companies and consumers?

"Researchers have been conducting mixed methods research for several decades and referring to it by an array of names" (Driscoll et al, 2007, p19). In fact, Maxwell states

that the use of different types of methods in research was around for a long time before anyone labelled it as mixed methods and even long before the terms qualitative and quantitative even existed (Maxwell, 2015, p13). “Mixed methods studies are those that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches into the research methodology of a single study or multi-phased study” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008, p21).

Mixed methods research does not intend to replace qualitative or quantitative research methods but instead it allows researchers to “draw from the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of both in single research studies and across studies” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p14-15). By drawing from the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research perhaps researchers can come to more in-depth and comprehensive conclusions. By using mixed methods in research, researchers are presented with an opportunity to use multiple approaches when answering their research questions as they are not limited to what type of data they can assess (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p17). Mixed methods research is “inclusive, pluralistic, and complementary” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p17) as researchers can analyse and assess different types of data on the same topic to come to a conclusion. For example, the qualitative data collected throughout a survey can allow a deeper understanding of survey responses and the quantitative analysis can provide an assessment of the pattern of responses (Driscoll et al, 2007, p26).

Ochieng Pamela Atieno even suggests that qualitative and quantitative research are actually inseparable as the qualitative data that is collected can be coded and transferred into quantitative data and vice versa all quantitative data is based on qualitative judgement (Atieno, 2009, p17). This is why these two different types of

research can be easily combined to find a deeper meaning and end result to your research (Antieno, 2009, p17).

“Methodological triangulation involves the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods and data to study the same phenomena within the same study or in different complementary studies” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008, p21). This type of study not only allows the researcher to view one topic from a multitude of viewpoints, but it enables us to understand the topic or findings in a deeper level (Jick, 2008, p107). This is why the mixed methods research design used within this study is the triangulation design. This approach gathers different but complementary data on the same topic which will then be combined in the results and findings for analysis and interpretation (Almalki, 2016, p292). The benefit of this design is that you can collect distinctly different data from different sources but then these sets of data will work together to create a stronger conclusion (Almalki, 2016, p292).

This approach allowed the gathering of a combination of different data on social media use within public relations which was combined to create a better and more substantial conclusion. As this chapter continues you will see how both qualitative and quantitative research techniques were combined throughout the study with the aim of fully understanding the role of social media within public relations.

“Qualitative methods of data gathering, and analysis have gained popularity over the years” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p8). Qualitative research is research that gets results without quantification or statistical procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p10).

Qualitative data can be “nonreducible text, including words and visuals delivered in static (e.g., paper) or dynamic form (e.g., theatre) (Bansal et al, 2018, p1189).



Qualitative data can be collected through interviews, observations, documents, etc (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p11). When collecting qualitative data, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection as this type of research involves fieldwork meaning that the researcher must physically go to the people, site or place to spend time recording the data (Antenio, 2009, p14). Qualitative research involves collecting descriptive data as the researcher gains an understanding of the research through content such as words or pictures and the researcher can then build a theory around this research. There are many benefits to using qualitative research methods.

Qualitative data collection allows research to simplify and manage data without destroying the context of the data (Antenio, 2009, p16). Qualitative research allows researchers generate “new ways of seeing existing data” (Antenio, 2009, p16) and it allows researchers to “understand phenomena deeply and in detail” (Antenio, 2009, p16). The qualitative research methods used in this study are content analysis and interviews.

Quantitative research is concerned with numbers, statistics etc. There are many benefits to using quantitative research one of which is that quantitative studies allow researchers to capture a snapshot of a user population (Madrigal and McClain, 2012). “Most quantitative research approaches, regardless of their theoretical differences, tend to emphasize that there is a common reality on which people can agree” (Newman & Benz, 1998, p2). Gathering numerical and statistical data allows researchers to gather information on preference trends, differences between groups and data on demographics (Madrigal and McClain, 2012). These are all reasons why a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative research was used for this

research. Once the qualitative research was gathered the aim was to further these findings and make them more reliable by backing them up with quantitative research. The quantitative research methods used in this study are engagement analysis and surveys.

### **3.2 Research Sample and Setting**

This research was conducted over a three-month period (May - July 2019). Two interviews were conducted. The first Interviewee is the head of marketing over music and entertainment at an Irish media company and the second Interviewee is the Press and Communications Officer with a farming association. The survey was sent to seven public relations professionals who agreed to take the survey anonymously. For the purpose of the online analysis research, the researcher reviewed the social media posts of these companies that were shared from January - March 2019. The decision to review past social media posts was made as it was easier and quicker to gather and analyse data this way rather than collecting this content as it was actively posted from May 2019 – July 2019. Within this three-month time frame, these companies combined posted a total of 455 social media posts across their social media platforms.

### **3.3 Research Methods**

#### **3.3.1 Content analysis**

The first type of research engaged with was content analysis. “The goal of content analysis is the systematic examination of communicative material (originally from the mass media in particular)” (Flick et al, 2004, p266). Qualitative content analysis can also allow for large amounts of data to be processed (Flick et al, 2004, p269). Content

analysis allows you to filter out certain aspects of the content that you are interested in studying or to analyse the content according to a particular criteria (Flick et al, 2004, p269). Overall “content analysis classifies textual material, reducing it to more relevant, manageable bits of data” (Weber, 1990, p5). “The advantage of the conventional approach to content analysis is gaining direct information from study participants without imposing preconceived categories” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p1279). This is exactly how this research was conducted and this data collected.

As the aim of this research was to examine the role of social media within public relations, the main focus of the research was to examine the social media accounts and posts of the three companies chosen. As stated at the beginning of this section, three companies were chosen in three different sectors and the content of their social media posts was analysed. Within these three months, Company A posted a total of 137 posts, Company B posted a total of 96 posts and Company C posted a total of 222 posts. Each social media post shared across their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram over a period of three months (January 2019 - March 2019) was analysed. As mentioned above, an advantage of content analysis is that there is no need for preconceived ideas of categories to fit your content into. A basic summary of what was contained in each post was recorded and it was not until after all the basic data was collected that the posts were divided into categories based on what information they included. The eleven categories created were as follows: Products/Services (any post that included a picture/description/price of a product or service), staff information (any post that included a staff member or information about staff member’s), events (any post that included an event held or attended), customer reviews/experiences (any post that

included a customer review or experience through online comments, letters, pictures etc), celebrity/Influencer collaborations (any post that included a mention or picture of a celebrity/influencer receiving a service or collaborating on a project), corporate information (any post about the business e.g., business hours, technical issues within branches, merger etc), campaign (any post that referred to a previous or ongoing public relations campaign), CSR (any post relating to corporate social responsibility), public Holidays (any post that referred to holidays such as St. Patrick's Day, Pancake Tuesday etc), popular culture (this applied to posts such as memes, references to TV shows, posting about news), competition (any post referring to a previous or ongoing competition).

### **3.3.2 Engagement analysis**

Social media provides businesses with a tool to not only share content but to track the engagement it gets (e.g., views, likes, shares, etc). This is important for businesses to understand what type of content their audience likes and engages with which is why it was also an important factor to incorporate into this research when determining the role of social media within public relations. Overall, social media is a tool for sharing content and connecting with others but sharing this content is pointless if it is not gaining a significant audience or level of engagement. Anyone can scroll through hundreds of social media posts and not notice or be interested enough in the content. That is why the engagement levels of each social media post were tracked and recorded.

At this stage the content analysis was complete. The researcher then went back over each post and tracked their engagement levels. For each individual post three things were looked for, how much positive engagement they got (likes), if the post generated a

discussion (comments), if the post had resulted in other users sharing this content further (shares). As posts were studied across three different social media networks, they did not all work in the exact same way or provide the same engagement functions for users so for the purpose of this research, the engagement levels were equated to each other as follows, a like or love reaction on Facebook equalled a like on Twitter and Instagram, a reply on Twitter equalled a comment on Facebook and Instagram and a retweet equalled a share on Facebook as Instagram does not publicly show the level of which a post has been shared with others. This data was collected and compiled into an excel sheet.

The data from the content analysis and engagement analysis combined allowed the researcher to add up the figures to see which type of posts got the most engagement, least engagement etc. Following this, the data was analysed. The conclusion from the results of this data which will be detailed in the results and analysis chapter.

### **3.3.3 Interviews**

Interviewing is a primary research method that allows researchers to collect qualitative data about their topic of interest (Stuckey, 2013). To collect good data, you must ask the right questions (Stuckey, 2013), these questions should be based around your topic of study and aimed at gaining data which will, in turn, answer your research questions.

Another advantage of face to face interviewing methods is that they allow the researcher the option to get more detail from answers by asking questions such as why or how (Stuckey, 2013).

Interviews were conducted following the content analysis to get the opinion of professionals on their view of social media. To do this a series of questions were put

together about social media use within public relations (Appendix I). These questions were based on information gathered in the literature review and the content analysis results and the interview was ended by asking the professional why they think social media is such an important tool today.

The first interviewee is the head of marketing over music and entertainment at an Irish media company and the second interviewee is the Press and Communications Officer with a farming association. There is a clear difference in the type of organisations that these two interviewees work for however this proved beneficial as it showed that despite their differences social media played the same role within PR and communications for both of these companies.

### **3.3.4 Survey**

Surveys are a common way for people to gather information, they are conducted in work places, groups, charities, government departments, companies and much more (Davies, 2007, p70). Surveys are mainly created for a specific purpose and surveys are thought to be an accurate way of describing a reality (Davies, 2007, p70). They are also useful when researchers want a response to the same questions from a number of different people (Kane & Brún, 2001, p195).

As this research contained the opinion of two different public relations/communications professionals on their uses and the importance of social media as a tool, it seemed important to see if other professionals had the same opinions of social media which is why a quick survey was created. By creating this survey, it allowed the researcher to determine if social media played the same role and had the same importance in various practitioner's work lives. This survey was created on SurveyMonkey and consisted of 10

questions about social media use within public relations (Appendix II). Once the survey was complete it was sent to 7 public relations practitioners who agreed to take the survey anonymously to provide their views on the topic and seven responses were received.

This survey is structured after a mini survey. This type of survey has a small number of questions and a small number of respondents and are useful as they are easier to analyse than a large survey (Kane & Brún, 2001, p195). “Mini surveys are carefully focused on a specific topic” (Kane & Brún, 2001, p201) and the focus of this survey was on social media use and its importance to working professionals.

### **3.4 Ethics and challenges**

There were ethical considerations to be made within this study when it came to interviewing and conducting a survey. It was essential to make sure the participants knew exactly what the study was about, that their participation was voluntary, and they had an option to withdraw their participation at any time. The interviewees were informed that they would be recorded, and the interview was then transcribed.

Participants were informed through the consent form that these interviews and transcriptions would be destroyed after graduation or within 24 months, whichever came sooner. The participants were also ensured that they would remain anonymous throughout the process and that any quotes used would be presented anonymously. For the interviews each participant was given an information/consent form detailing the study and their involvement which they signed and those who took the survey were presented with an online multiple-choice question before continuing the survey that

explained what the aim of this research was and asked for their consent to include the data and quotes that they provided anonymously within the thesis.

### **3.5 Limitations**

Some of the limitations identified throughout this study are that posts studied were shared within a short time frame, participating in content analysis can present certain challenges, the content within the comments on these social media posts were not analysed and there were a small sample of opinions from working professionals.

These three companies' social media posts were studied over a period of three months. As it was decided to study these posts across three different social media platforms, if any more than three months of content was studied there would not have been enough time to both gather all the data and analyse it along with the other research methods included throughout this study. One challenge of choosing content analysis as a type of research is that "a common issue in qualitative content analysis is that categories and themes are described on various levels of abstraction and interpretation" (Graneheim et al, 2017, p33) which can make the research seem untrustworthy (Graneheim et al, 2017, p33). However, to combat this problem the categories are detailed in the above methodology and they include examples of the type of social media posts included in each category. The aim of this is to provide those who read this research with an understanding of the type of posts included in each category. This is another reason why this study follows a mixed methods style research, so that the conclusions and interpretations from the content analysis could be backed up by data collected in the two interviews and seven survey responses.



Also, within the literature review, interviews and surveys, the use of social media to combat negative publicity and comments was referred to. As there were no clear social media posts shared by the companies regarding bad publicity or a crisis within the content analysis, it may have been more beneficial to the study if the comment section on each of the posts were analysed to see if there were many negative comments and if the companies had engaged with. Also, if the comment section on each post was analysed, more data on how companies and public relations professionals engage with their audiences in general could have been gathered.

Finally, two interviews with working professionals and 7 other professionals took part in the survey. This sample did provide significant information about the recurring role of social media within different organisations however it may have been more beneficial to conduct more interviews and more surveys.

Therefore, if there was a longer period of time to conduct this research these limitations would be taken on board and these social media posts would be studied over a longer time frame, with the content of the comment sections analysed to gain more data on the use of social media in combating negativity and a more interviews and survey responses would have been conducted.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

The objective of this study was to determine the role social media plays within public relations. To do this, a mixed methods research style was used, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods to create a stronger more significant end conclusion. The qualitative research methods engaged with were online analysis (content & engagement) and interviews. The quantitative research methods engaged

with were engagement analysis and surveys. The content analysis allowed the researcher to determine what content these businesses used their social media platforms to publish. This data combined with the engagement analysis provided an insight into what type of content their audiences engaged with the most allowing further insight to the role of social media. The interviews allowed the researcher to gather the opinions of the professionals who work with social media within the public relations and communications professions. Finally, the survey provided further data on working professionals' opinions which backed up findings from both the content analysis, engagement analysis and interviews. The next chapter will discuss the findings following this research.

## **Chapter 4: Results and analysis**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the findings of this research and discusses the relevance of these findings in the context of the original research questions posed:

1. What is the role of social media within public relations?
2. Is the pattern of social media use consistent across these different businesses and participants?
3. Is third party media coverage and 'word of mouth' communication still important to companies and consumers?

To discuss these questions the results of the mixed-methods study combining qualitative and quantitative research will be discussed. The research methods used included a content analysis of three companies' social media accounts followed by an engagement analysis of these social media posts, interviews and surveys. While conducting this research I noticed several themes that were recurring throughout these various research methods. Due to how these different types of data combined, the results and analysis are presented in a thematic style. These themes are as follows: everyday use of social media, relationship building, two-way communication, reputation management, content control and word-of mouth communication.

### **4.2 Everyday use of social media**

Social media has become an undeniably important communications tool that is used every day within businesses. 100% of the survey respondents stated using social media everyday within their work lives. As well as this, Interviewee 1 stated that they use

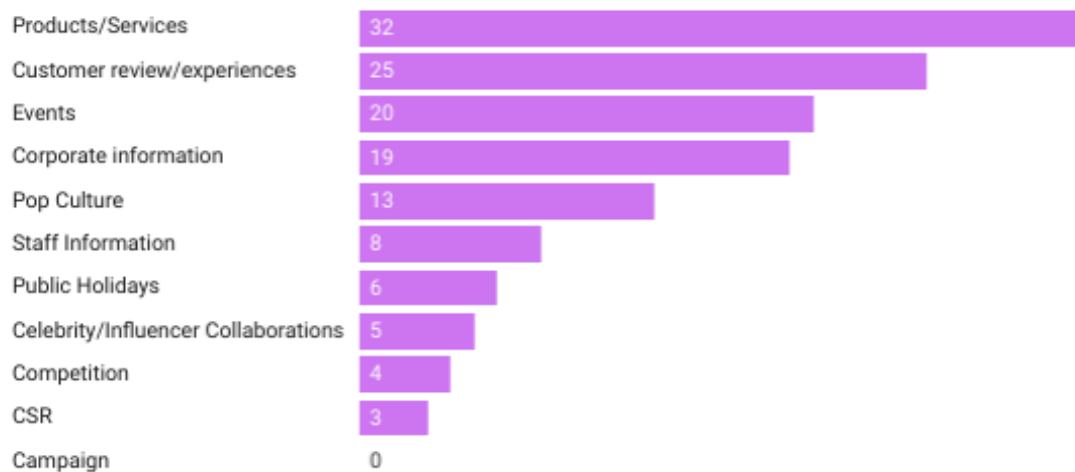
social media “every day, multiple times a day” (Interviewee 1) and that they have “a 24/7 approach seven days a week to all of our social media” (Interviewee 1). This approach is due to the fact that “social media is always on 24/7 and that’s where our audience are” (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 1, referring to the importance of social media, said “I kind of don’t know what we did before” (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 2 had a similar outlook on social media, stating using it every day (Interviewee 2) and how social media has become “a new 24-hour news cycle” (Interviewee 2) which means that “we know we can get our message out, but we don’t have to wait for the traditional forms of media. So, we can react in a timely fashion as well to breaking stuff with them” (Interviewee 2). Having such a tool at your disposal 24/7 regardless of whether you are in the workplace or not, means that businesses can constantly post content, constantly engage with consumers, monitor engagement levels and if needed react to certain news along with their audience.

#### **4.3 Relationship building**

Company A operates within the health care sector and overall, they shared posts about their products and services the most, followed by customer reviews and experiences and then posts about events held and attended. Throughout the three months, there were a total of eight posts regarding staff information. This was a significantly low number compared to the other categories of posts, however, despite this low number, posts about staff information got a surprisingly high engagement level. The graphs on the following page show how despite the number of posts about staff information only being a quarter of the number of posts about products and services, they still got 75% of the engagement that posts about products and services received.

These posts included information about where staff members went to college, one post showed a staff member celebrating a baby shower and another showed a staff member's recent engagement. This might indicate that the audience engaged with these posts as they enjoyed reading and receiving information about the staff and they like getting to know the staff on a more personal level. This may also indicate that audiences like to have more personal relationships with those providing them with a service and for companies, relationships like these can create a more loyal and committed clientele (Barry et al, 2011).

### Company A - All social media platforms content analysis



[Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Figure 1: Content analysis of Company A's posts

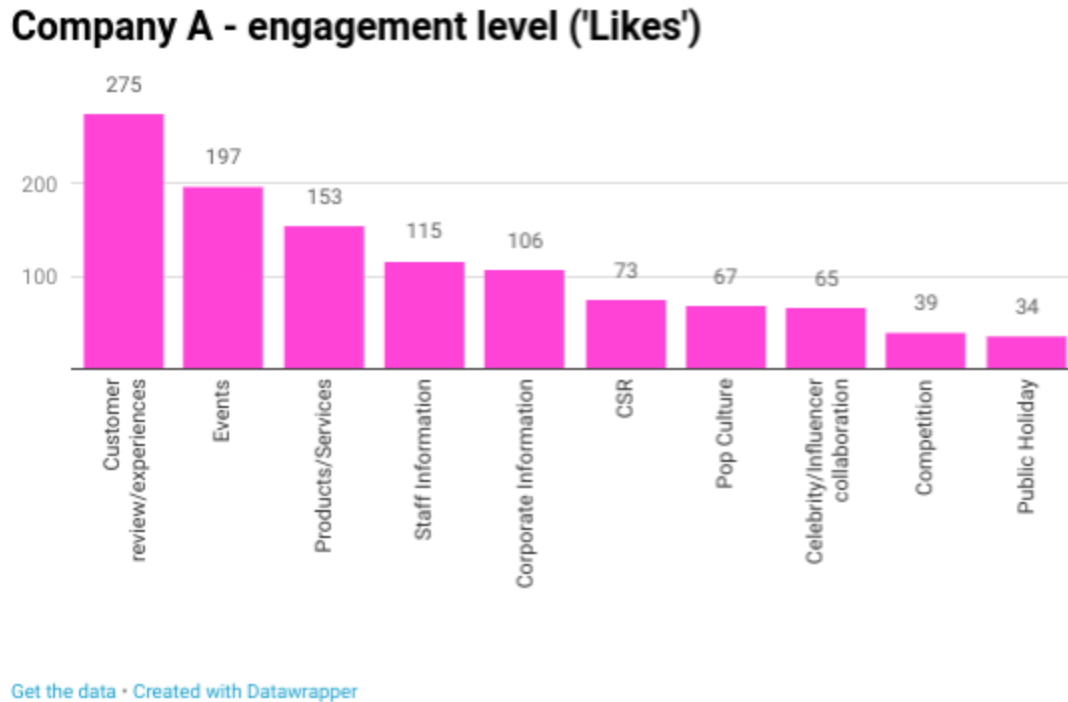


Figure 2: Company A's engagement analysis

As seen from the graphs, events were the third most posted type of content on Company A's page and they also received the second-highest level of engagement on their page. Events are important as they are a way to meet with consumers and clients directly and they "have the ability to offer a deeper level of worth to consumers than other content because they combine value with experience" (Brenner, 2018). While conducting these interviews, Interviewee 2 stated "social media does not remove the need to have events. To have face to face contact with your members or your audience with actual events is still important to us" (Interviewee 2). However, Interviewee 2 stated using social media "to publicize events" (Interviewee 2) that they had. As social media allows businesses to put out information about events, it is another important factor in

how social media helps businesses to build relationships with their audiences. By publicising information about events on their social media it facilitates in allowing face to face communication between companies and consumers and these high engagement levels may also indicate that companies are presented in a good light among their online following as it shows a willingness to communicate and engage with their audiences.

Company B operates within the financial sector and used its social media accounts to mainly share information regarding a campaign they were currently running. Company B posted a total of 86 posts throughout this three-month period with 71 of these posts containing content about their campaign. Overall, 82% of Company B's social media posts throughout this time frame contained content regarding their campaign (Appendix VI).

However, when conducting this content analysis of Company B's social media posts, it became necessary to create several subcategories within these campaign posts as within their campaign they held a challenge, worked with several celebrities and influencers and worked with students (Appendix VII). One noticeable finding from conducting an engagement analysis on these subcategories was that Company B's own posts about their campaign challenge got a significantly higher engagement level than their own posts containing general information about their campaign. This challenge hosted as part of their campaign asked students and schools all over the country to compete. These posts regarding the challenge mostly contained pictures and information regarding said students and schools.

## Engagement: Campaign vs Campaign Challenge

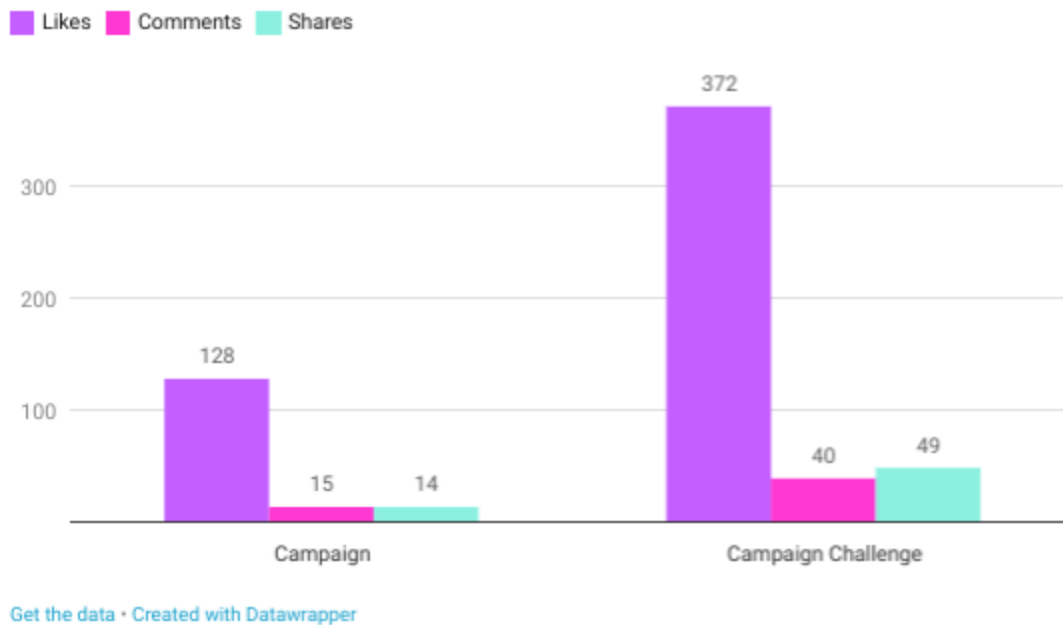


Figure 3: Company B Engagement analysis (Campaign vs Campaign Challenge)

This graph shows the engagement levels gained on posts containing general content about the campaign and the engagement levels gained on posts containing content about the students and schools who took part in this campaign challenge. From this it could be concluded that the audiences engaged with these posts much more as they enjoyed seeing this company engaging with young people and communities all over the country. While building relationships with these schools at their campaign events they again, may also have built a positive relationship with their online audience by showing their willingness to engage with young people and their communities.

Within their campaign, Company B also held a competition among students for the chance to work with them on the campaign. The students selected were used as correspondents providing updates and information on the campaign and campaign



event. Company B posted several videos on their Instagram page about their campaign, campaign challenge and campaign correspondents. Again, the videos containing content about the challenge and correspondents gained more views than the ones specifically about the campaign itself.

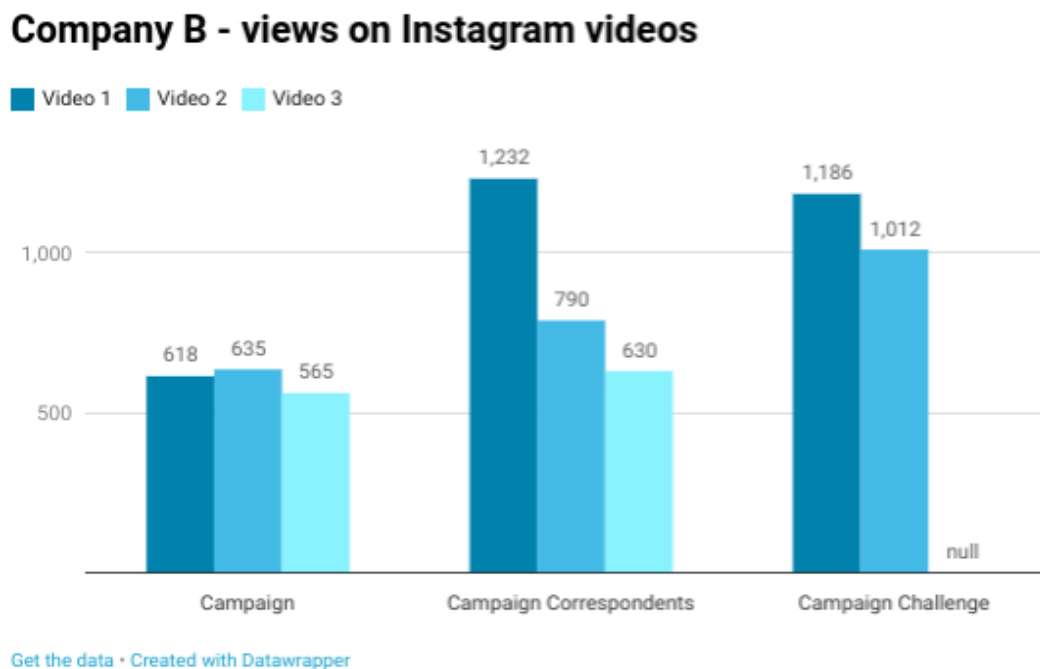


Figure 4: Company B - views on Instagram videos

Once again, the higher engagement was got on the posts that contained content on students and communities. The results show that there was much more engagement gotten on posts that contained content on how Company B connected with and included students and communities in their campaign. From this it could be suggested that firstly the audience enjoy seeing companies engage with their communities and audiences and secondly the higher engagement levels could suggest that by posting this content, Company B built a more positive and stronger relationship with their online communities as well.

The results from the content analysis on Company C's (Retail) social media accounts showed that they used their accounts to mainly communicate content about their products and services. 83% of posts across Company C's social media platforms were posts containing information about products and services.

### Company C - Overall content analysis

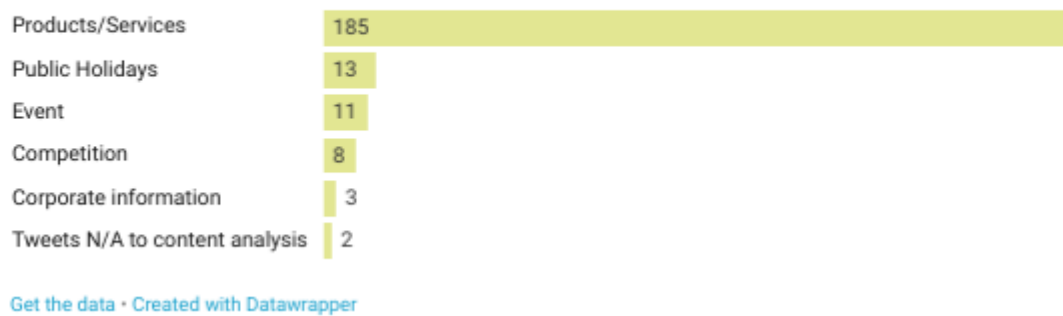


Figure 5: Company C - Content analysis

Again, a subcategory was created within products and services as Company C collaborated with a number of celebrities and influencers on upcoming products and collections (Appendix VIII).

Company C's use of their social media accounts was significantly different from the other companies. Their main use of social media was to communicate information about their products and services and they also had a significant number of collaborations with celebrities and influencers on products and collections. However, Company C had a much larger following than Company's A and B.

Company	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Total
A	17,098	3,380	1,444	21,922
B	80,101	30,300	7,080	117, 481
C	231,072	19,100	82,900	333, 072

From this information, it could be concluded that as Company C has a significantly bigger audience, they have already cultivated the audience and relationship that they want to have with their following. Therefore, they now have a platform in which they can directly communicate information about their products and services to the audience that they've built up. Company A and B still have a smaller audience which could suggest that they are continuing to use social media as a relationship-building tool.

From the overall examination of the content and engagement analysis, these results seemed to demonstrate the importance of the audience. As Interviewee 2 stated when speaking about content control, putting content out on social media is pointless if it does not engage the audience. The audience's engagement here is important because it demonstrated the type of content that audiences engaged with the most. These two companies (A & B) used social media to communicate information such as products and services, general information and campaign information but Company A and Company B's online following engaged the most with the content that saw the companies engaging with real people and celebrating personal achievements with their staff members. These engagement levels suggest that the audience enjoy creating deeper relationships with those providing them products or services and that they enjoy seeing

companies engaging with their communities. The results from Company C's online analysis suggest that as they had a much larger following than the other companies, they had already succeeded in engaging their audiences and had established a significant and loyal following. Having such a large following allowed them to communicate mainly information about their products directly to their audiences.

However, following these results, the interviews provided more data on how working public relations and communications professionals viewed social media. When asked if they used social media to build relationships, Interviewee 1 stated "Absolutely. So, it's building meaningful relationships with your audience, building a connection, engaging with your audience. What we always say is we go to where our audience is (Interviewee 1)". When asked what they thought the main reason they used social media was for Interviewee 2 replied stating that they "want to attract new members" (Interviewee 2) and grow their membership (Interviewee 2). While conducting this survey among public relations and communications professionals, question 5 asked "For what reason do you use social media the most?" and participants were presented with five multiple choice options (1. As a platform to communicate products and services, 2. Two - way communication with consumers, 3. Crisis management, 4. Complaint management and 5. Build relationships with your audience). Out of seven respondents, three responded to 'build relationships with your audience', one responded for 'two - way communication with consumers' and three responded 'as a platform to communicate products and services'.

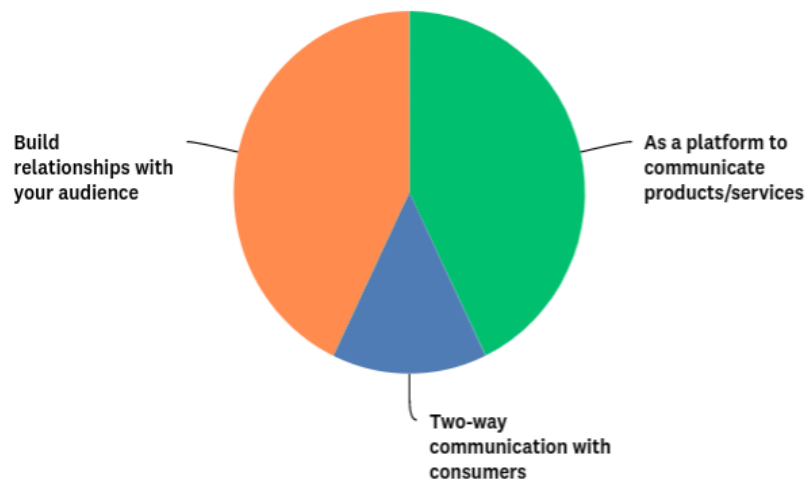


Figure 8: Survey responses - Social media uses

#### 4.4 Two-way communications

The two-way communication that social media allows between consumer and company has also become important to public relations. Interviewee 2 said they would use social media to “engage with our members and to get feedback. And you know oftentimes we would know what subjects or what topical issues are most affecting our members and stuff by the feedback that we get by the interaction that we get on these platforms and the reaction we get from them” (Interviewee 2). Interviewee 2 stated that social media was “a good way of engaging which are the most pertinent issues that we cover or what exactly is on people's minds on any one day” (Interviewee 2). By engaging in two-way communication with their audience they could gain a better insight to the thoughts and opinions of their audiences. Interviewee 2 also stated that overall, social media “allows you to engage with more people and get feedback to build your brand, name recognition, to highlight issues” (Interviewee 2). By knowing what is important to the audience the public relations professional has more information on how to positively

engage their audiences and gain more publicity. Interviewee 1 also stated using social media to “track our engagement across and within content and audio content whether that's video or audio or ground or listen back” (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 1 also said “within all of our brands there is a dedicated social media monitor and their job solely is to monitor moderate, curate, create all the content on social media. Their objective is to grow engagement and to grow reach and grow following to a lesser extent because we know now it's actually about engagement. So, it's quality over quantity” (Interviewee 1).

The final question on the survey asked participants “Why in your view is social media important/not important in PR? (300 words max.)”. One respondent stated “social media allows for two-way communication with consumers that is not possible with other formats. It allows the consumer to build a relationship with the brand and for a brands personality to shine through”. This respondent also stated that “feedback can be received much faster than traditional media”. Another respondent stated that social media is “very important to get your message across to your audience and for promotion and gaining attention and followers”.

The importance of two-way communication and engaging with your audience is recognised by both interviewees as this allows companies to know what content is important to their audience and what kind of content their audience engages with the most which assists in the relationship-building process between company and consumer. Again, these respondents state the importance of communicating with your audience and allowing consumers to create a significant relationship with brands. Brands can do this by showing their “personality” through content such as staff information posts, events or campaigns as we saw in the above content analysis. As

well as this by engaging with the audience and gathering information on what content and topics the audiences engage with companies can then use social media to gain attention, a larger following and a stronger brand image.

While conducting the content and engagement analysis of the three companies' social media accounts, it became clear that there was no 'one-size fits all' approach to using social media platforms. There was not a universal pattern in which the same posts were posted on the same day at the same time across each social media platform. As well as this there was no clear social media platform that was universally used the most among each company. Within the survey five respondents stated using all three social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) within their work lives with one other respondent stating using a combination of Facebook and Twitter and another stating using both Facebook and Instagram. When asked which social media platform they find the most effective there was again, a variation of answers. Two respondents found Twitter the most effective platform, one respondent found Instagram the most effective, two respondents found Facebook and Instagram equally effective, another found Twitter and Instagram equally effective and another respondent stated finding all three platforms equally effective as each other. When conducting these interviews, Interviewee 1 found Instagram the most effective social media platform (Interviewee 1) and Interviewee 2 found both Facebook and Twitter effective (Interviewee 2).

However, there was one big reason for such a variation of answers. The social media platforms and the way they were used all depended on the type of audience the business was catering for. This is because companies need to engage in two-way communication with their audiences, therefore they need to use and engage with the

platforms in the same way that their audiences do. Businesses go to where their audiences are, if Facebook is popular with their audiences that's where they will be too and vice versa. Interviewee 1 said "we go to the social media where our audience are" (Interviewee 1). When it came to the radio shows Interviewee 1 explained "the age demographic of those audiences ranges from about 15 to 40. So, a huge percentage of the younger cohort of that demographic are on Instagram. That's where we are" (Interviewee 1). When asked about which platforms they found more effective, Interviewee 2 said "I think it's important when you're using social media to be aware of your audience" (Interviewee 2). Interviewee 2 also said it was difficult getting their demographic to move towards social media as they are a "farming organisation so there's an older demographic" (Interviewee 2). However now they find that "both Facebook and Twitter work well" (Interviewee 2). Throughout the interviews, both participants also stated using different social media platforms for different reasons. Interviewee 1 said that "Twitter we use kind of more as an influence a real time channel just to what's coming up on the show, a guest has just said this etc" (Interviewee 1) and that "the content that we would put on Instagram would be very different at the content we would have on Facebook would be very different to the content we have on Twitter as people consume those channels and those platforms in a very different way" (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 2 also said "Facebook is more for our members and then Twitter is more for kind of getting our message out to a broader audience not just our members" (Interviewee 2). These Interviewee's used the same platforms their audiences do and used these platforms for different reasons to maximise engagement on each platform.



#### **4.5 Reputation management**

Social media allows businesses to engage with audiences and followers through two-way communication and as seen in research from the literature review, social media plays a big role in crisis management by allowing instant and direct communication.

Therefore, prior to this study the researcher had a preconceived idea that businesses would actively use social media to engage with and resolve negative comments.

However, this research proved otherwise. Throughout the content analysis of the companies' social media posts the researcher did not come across any posts relating to crisis management, therefore, the researcher decided to ask Interviewee's if they used social media to combat negative comments and publicity. Both agreed that negative comments are a given when dealing with social media. Interviewee 1 said "because of the nature of what we do which is live radio. Yes, we are going to get negative comments, so it could be the comments a presenter has made on the radio, a guest that they had on that might be a little bit controversial in the comments that this made you something that the station has done" (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 2 said "well I think there's a certain amount of negative comments that comes with any social media" (Interviewee 2). When asked about how they deal with such comments, Interviewee 1 stated "what we do is we discuss, and we will get back to absolutely every one of them. So, we never leave a comment unresponded to. We don't just leave it there. We will always have a response" (Interviewee 1). However, instead of using social media to comeback to this negativity, they "would take it off line and say you know drop us an email us at or DM us to give us your number and we will always get back to them with the full response with the name to resolve it" (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 2 also said that they "tend not to come back to much publicly" (Interviewee 2) and that "there are

certainly people that we will maybe contact privately” (Interviewee 2). They have also “arranged meetings with people in the past and tried to resolve it that way” (Interviewee 2). Interviewee 2 said that they would try to avoid having “spats with people on social media” (Interviewee 2). Another way of dealing with negativity online was to “counter it by putting out accurate information” (Interviewee 2) by promoting their argument on their own platforms rather than going “head to head with them directly on social media”.

When dealing with or considering engaging with negative comments it is important to determine if the comment is genuine or not by judging “them on a case by case basis. It would completely depend on what the subject matter was. I mean if it's just people trolling and looking divisive you ignore that, and you can see that you know, you just have to look at somebody's profile, you have to look at the type of comments and content they've engaged with in the past” (Interviewee 1). However, when “they're genuine comments on concerns and criticisms or issues we would like to respond to those” (Interviewee 1) due to “the nature of what we do is you know radio is two way and it's all about our listeners and our audience and so we engage with them all of the time. We don't kind of run away from that” (Interviewee 1). These results indicate the importance of dealing with negativity in the correct way and knowing why is best to ignore and engage in such negativity. However, the fact that these comments are handled offline may indicate that public relations professionals handle negativity away from the view of their online audience. Resolving these negative comments is clearly important to these professions however both interviewee's stated that they rarely have to engage with such negative comments, with interviewee 1 saying they might only spend “5 percent of the time” resolving these issues. This was a recurring pattern with 5

survey respondents stating spending between 5% - 10% monitoring and resolving negative comments online. One other respondent stated spending between 10% - 20% of time combating negative comments and another spends between 20% - 30% of their time. Even these other two responses are not significantly high percentages of time.

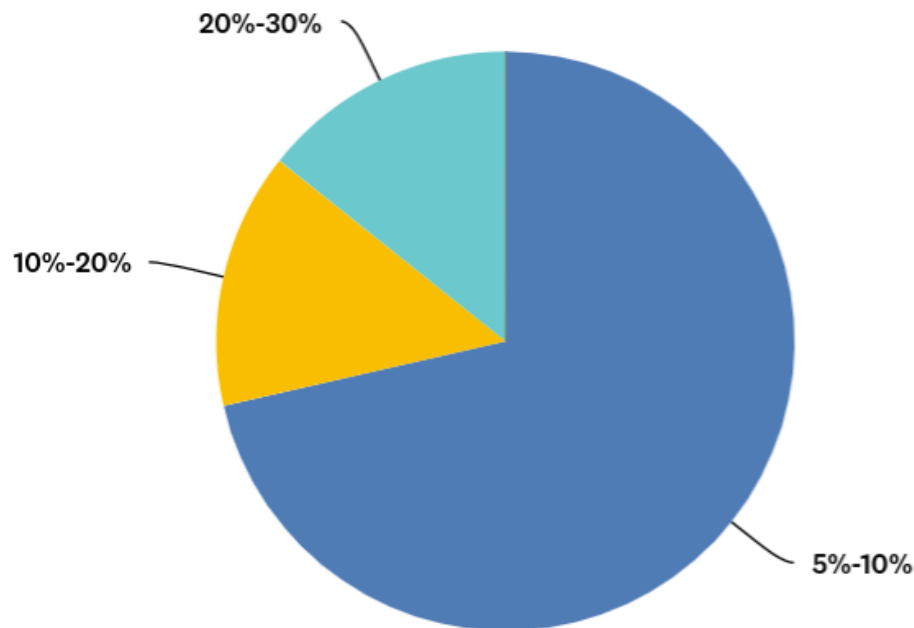


Figure 6: Survey response - managing negative comments

#### 4.6 Content control

Social media has provided public relations practitioners with more control over the content that gets shared as they no longer have to wait for an editor to approve a story being published (Brahma, 2018, p.2). When asked about this Interviewee 1 agreed that before if you needed to get a press release or statement out to consumers or the

audience “you do it via the traditional media you send a press release and you hope that they print it, you send it to the stations and you hope that it’s read on the news bulletins” (Interviewee 1) whereas now “you can get your message out to your audience in a much faster more controlled manner” (Interviewee 1). However, it is important to put “the groundwork in to building that audience and building your engagement” (Interviewee 1) so “you can distribute that message in real time and actually monitor the responses and get back from there” (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 2 also agreed that social media gave content control back “to a certain extent” (Interviewee 2) if it’s directed well. “You know you can make all the contact in the world and only a handful of people will see it” (Interviewee 2) and because of this possibility that within these busy social media networks things will get missed it’s important to have “good visuals and back it up with really good content and be directed or its just shooting out into the stratosphere with no plan or no aim” (Interviewee 2). One survey participant also responded saying that social media “allows brands to control their own message”. However, another stated that social media “circumvents the press corps and reaches audiences unfiltered. But, in doing that, the risk is that the message loses depth and dodges third-party or independent validation. Social is good in an era of instant communication. But it reduces people's capacity to critically analyse which has profoundly negative implications”.

#### **4.7 Word- of-Mouth communication**

Traditionally public relations have relied on traditional media sources such as newspapers, radio and television to gain publicity for their companies and clients. This relationship was also important because publicity gained from these sources was

considered earned media. Earned media is important because it comes from an unbiased source and earned media is central to the public relations practice. With social media becoming such an important tool within the profession, the researcher wanted to ask participants of the interviews and survey if social media had become the main tool in which they liked to distribute information. Interviewee 1 stated that due to the nature of the business they are in, radio would be their initial platform for distributing information followed by social media (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 2 said that due to their age demographic which would be 55+, they still “rely heavily as well on traditional media particularly print and radio” (Interviewee 2). However, they will move as their audience moves more and more onto online and digital media (Interviewee 2). Within the survey, three respondents stated that social media is their preferred tool to communicate with their audience, two respondents stated radio as their preferred medium, another selected online news media and another selected television.

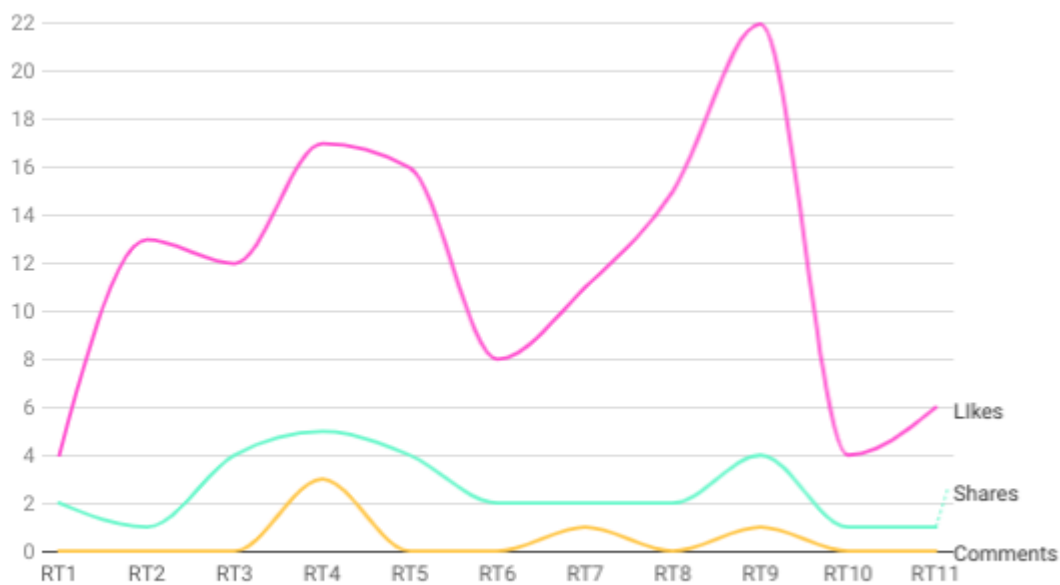
It is clear that traditional and third-party media sources are still important to those working within the public relations or communications profession however the preference is slowly moving towards social media for communicating with audiences. Another important way of gaining third party publicity is through ‘word of mouth’ information as mentioned in the above literature review. As social media has evolved, ‘word of mouth’ information has evolved along with it. People now have a new platform to communicate their opinions and reviews with others through status updates, opinion polls, review sections etc. Throughout the content and engagement analysis there were two significant trends.

As seen in Figure 1 Company A's second most posted content were photos or screengrabs of positive reviews they received from clients and again from Figure 2 it was shown that these posts actually got the highest level of engagement across their social media platforms. Consumers or clients engage with reviews from other people as they like to know how others found an experience or product before indulging themselves. By reading other reviews customers can be comforted that they too will have a good experience with a product, service or company and not be left disappointed or the reviews may persuade a consumer to steer away from buying a product or service. These reviews can be considered 'word of mouth' information however it has taken a new form through being shared on social media. Company A utilised this form of third party or 'word of form' information by posting this positive feedback to their social media pages to create a positive image or buzz around their products and services. When using social media, companies are also presented with the opportunity to have a review or rating section on their business's social media accounts, this provides an easy and accessible way to allow customers post reviews and make them visible to other users. In 2017, Lucy Benton wrote an article saying "consumer reviews contribute to the company's reputation. Positive reviews and posts make the brand even more reliable and send a positive message to other potential customers, while negative reviews do the opposite" (Benton, 2017). This also relates back as a possible reason public relations and communications professionals did not actively engage with negative comments online, sharing positive reviews and creating engagement around them creates a positive image but by engaging with negative comments online it might only create more engagement and awareness around them. Therefore, handling comments

offline as the interviewee's stated may be a more appropriate way of handling these issues rather than creating engagement around them and contributing to a negative reputation. Overall positive reviews are a type of 'word of mouth' information and they are important as they come from a third-party source and can boost a company's reputation.

Company B also showed a different use of sharing 'word of mouth' information via social media. As seen in the graph above, I created another category which contained 'retweets'. When Company B's campaign event occurred in March, they began to retweet several posts to their Twitter page in which they had been mentioned by other users. They retweeted posts that others had shared about their campaign and their campaign challenge. These retweets received a surprisingly consistent and high level of engagement.

### Company B - Campaign Retweets



[Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Figure 7: Campaign Retweets - engagement levels

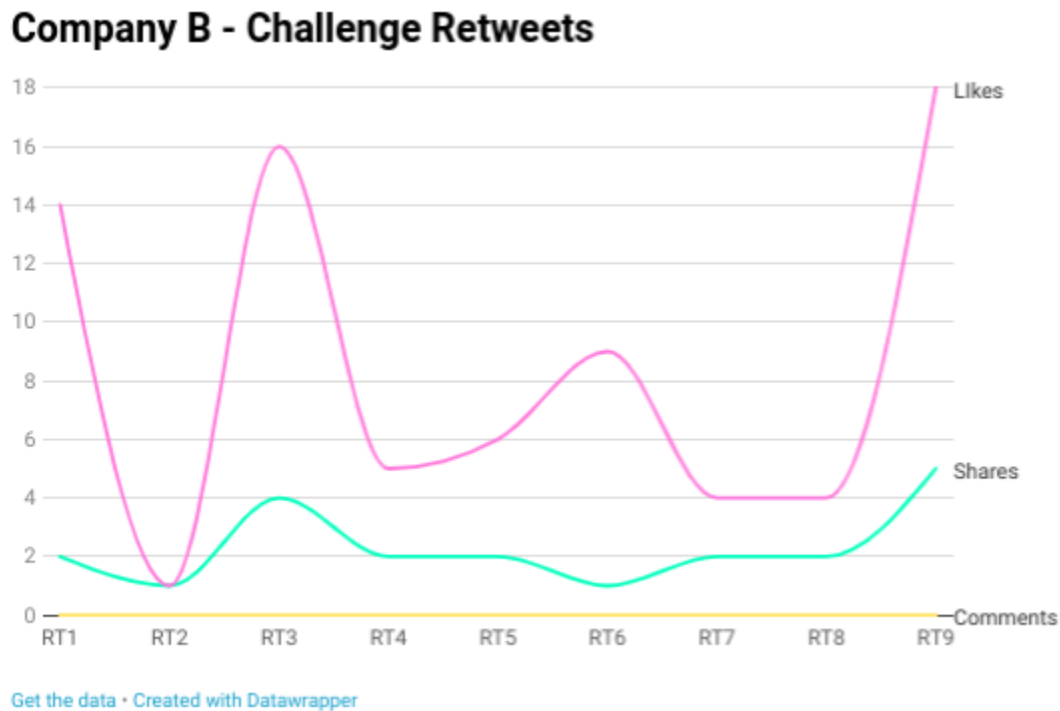


Figure 8: Campaign Challenge Retweets - engagement levels

These posts are considered ‘word of mouth’ information because they were posted by other social media users, members of this company’s audience, and those who attended the campaign event. Company B used these tweets to their advantage by retweeting them to their own social media page which allowed them to share even more content about their event with their audience. As well as this, it came from a third party, unbiased source which could also make it earned media. Again, this type of ‘word of mouth’ media is important because each tweet was posted by a user who wanted to share their opinion and experience of the campaign with their own followers. By choosing which posts they would retweet, Company B could retweet only good content that would contribute to their positive image and filter out the bad tweets if needed.



Therefore, ensuring that everything on their main social media page was positive, content led and directed towards their audience.

#### **4.8 Discussion and recommendations**

The objective of this research was to determine the role of social media within public relations. Through a mixed methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data, the analysis found that the main role of social media within public relations is engaging with your audience. Social media is a new communications tool that allows companies and public relations practitioners to develop positive relationships with their desired audiences.

The results of the content and engagement analysis showed that creating and building relationships is important to consumers as the highest levels of engagement came from posts containing information about staff and posts containing information about students and communities that took part in the campaign. These high engagement levels suggest that the audience enjoys content that allows them to create a deeper relationship with companies. It could be suggested that these posts were so popular because they included content regarding real people. Users saw Company A's employees as more relatable when given personal information about them and Company B's audience saw them engaging with students and communities which may have then built a positive image and relationship among their online audience.

These results also demonstrate the importance of engaging the audience as posting content on social media is only useful if they audience sees and engages with this content. Company C had a significantly higher audience and social media following than

the other two companies which brought about the conclusion that once you have built these relationships and maintained them social media can provide a great tool to communicate information about products and services to this audience.

Both interviewees agreed that social media is helpful in building relationships with their audiences and attracting a bigger following. They also used social media to monitor opinions by engaging their members and receiving feedback on the topics and issues that are important to them and what content they enjoy. By monitoring what is important to their audiences, professionals can target and grow a bigger following and engage with their audience more effectively. The survey responses showed that working professionals used social media for building relationships, two-way communication with audiences and to communicate information about products and services. These factors are important again as it has been shown that when companies engage with their audiences they tend to spend more money with them (Barry et al, 2011).

When examining if these companies and working professionals used social media in the same way and had the same opinions, several patterns emerged. Both interviewees and survey respondents stated using social media everyday within their work lives. Social media provides businesses and professionals with a new communications tool available 24/7 to engage with and monitor their audiences and both interviewees reference how social media needs a “24/7 approach” (Interviewee 1) and acts as a 24-hour news cycle (Interviewee 2).

Which social media platforms used by professionals depended on the audience they were targeting as companies go where their audience are. As well as this, these

professionals used each platform differently and posted content on these platforms differently as audiences received information differently on each platform.

When engaging with negative comments, survey responses showed a majority spending only 5%-10% of their time managing negative comments online. The two interviewees also admitted spending little time handling negative comments online but they both also agreed on a certain way to handle them when they did occur. They agreed that it was important to respond to negative comments but best to engage with these comments offline which may suggest that although it is important to resolve these issues, it is better to not engage in this negativity online in front of other audience members. This shows the importance of knowing how to correctly handle social media conversations and the increased emphasis on hiring social media managers within businesses (Kaplaein and Haenlein, 2010, p.66).

Interviewee's believed that social media has given content control back to public relations professional's, but Interviewee 2 believed that having content control is only important if you've engaged with and built up that relationship with your audience. This again demonstrates how posting social media content is only effective when the content is getting engagement amongst the companies' audience. Anyone can share a social media post but getting it noticed among their following is important to companies.

Although having content control is an advantage to professionals, this research indicated that third party and unbiased media coverage is still important to both companies and consumers. Traditional media sources are still used and preferred by some while social media grows more each day. 'Word of mouth' information is an

important medium of communication to companies and this medium has grown and evolved as social media has, allowing users and companies to engage in 'word of mouth' information in new ways (eWOM). The high levels of engagement on Company A's customer reviews and the consistent levels of engagement on Company B's retweets show that third party coverage is just as important to consumers as before. The results indicate that WOM communication is still important to companies as both Company A and Company B posted a significant amount of these posts to their social media pages. These posts become even more beneficial to companies when shared to their social media pages as they allow companies to share more positive content regarding their business, but they have the added benefit of coming from a third party, unbiased source.

Each of these elements all support the claim that the role of social media is to engage with your audience. Social media is all about the audience, engaging with the audience, monitoring audience opinions, knowing what the audience likes and dislikes in regard to content and social media use and presenting your company in a positive way to the audience. The audience engage with the content they enjoy seeing which were posts that saw companies trying to create a deeper relationship with their communities and staff members. Public relations and communications professionals do everything they can to accommodate their audience and ensure they are using their social media platforms to engage with them in the correct way using content they enjoy. Both professionals agreed that putting content out there is pointless unless there has been work put into building relationships with your online following. Third party and 'word of

mouth' coverage also assists the relationship building process by providing unbiased and positive feedback in the eyes of the audience.

This research contained quite a small sample group of 2 interviewees, 7 survey respondents and a short three-month time period of content and engagement analysis. However, from this small data set, significant results were achieved. As detailed in the limitations section of Chapter 3, if a longer period of time was taken to study more content and a larger sample group of participants were acquired, this research could have a more significant impact in research on the role that social media plays within public relations.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

Over the last decade, social media has transformed communications and changed how we act and interact with others. Social media has grown to become a significant communications tool for both the individual and the business. Social media is a relatively new tool within businesses and has become increasingly important within the public relations sector as PR professionals are being increasingly relied on to generate good publicity for companies (Aronczyk, Edwards and Kantola, 2017).

This study set out to explore what the role of social media is within public relations. By doing this, the research also sought to determine the uses and opinions of social media among public relations practitioners and to determine if unbiased, third-party communications such as word-of-mouth communications were still important to companies and consumers.

To investigate this a mixed methods research approach was used. This approach combined both qualitative and quantitative research in an effort to create a stronger end conclusion. The qualitative research engaged with in this study was used to offer an indication of what content businesses used their social media accounts to share and how public relations professionals used and thought about social media. Quantitative research was used to offer an indication of how this social media content was received among audience members and if various public relations professionals used social media in the same ways. This research also aimed to determine if unbiased, third party media coverage is still important to companies and consumers.

The results of the study overall, suggested that social media is an important tool used every day within the public relations profession for relationship building, two-way

communication, reputation management, content control and word of mouth communication.

The online analysis indicated that users engaged with content that included information on staff members, students and communities. A possible reason for this could be that users or audiences engage with companies when they present themselves on a more personal, relatable level and are willing to communicate and build relationships with their audiences. The interviewee's and survey respondents also agreed that social media allowed them to create deeper connections and more meaningful relationships with their audiences (Interviewee 1).

Further results showed that professionals used social media for two-way communication and in doing so they always had their audience in mind, they used social media platforms where their audiences were and used each platform differently to maximise engagement with the audience. Engaging in two-way communication also allowed them to get feedback on important topics and content that their audiences enjoyed. By doing this they could create content that their audiences would enjoy and engage with and again, maximise engagement with their audiences.

When managing their reputation, the two interviewees stated that they did not actively engage with negativity online. They found it was important to respond to these comments but more effective to engage with this negativity offline. A possible reason for this could be that it is better to take these comments or complaints away from the view of the rest of their online audience rather than actively engaging in negativity online and participating in creating a negative view of the company.

Both interviewee's agreed that social media gave content control back to public relations practitioners, but the second interviewee stressed that the ability to post whatever content you want is pointless if you have not built up a relationship with your following.

Results from this research also showed that having unbiased, third party coverage of products, services and campaigns through reviews and word-of-mouth communication is still important to companies and consumers as their was consistent engagement levels with these posts and these companies (Company A & B) actively shared these word-of-mouth social media posts to their pages.

Limitations involved in this study included the number of interviewees, the duration of the online analysis, the extent of the online analysis and the challenge of conducting content analysis. In relation to the number of interviewees, a larger group of interviewees could be beneficial to gain a broader perspective on social media usage within the public relations profession. A longer time period taken for the content analysis and a further examination of the comment sections within each post could have provided a more in-depth view of the content posted on social media and how negativity is handled by public relations professionals within the comment sections. By examining these comment sections on each of the social media posts of each company it may have determined if these companies too monitored negative comments but took them offline when resolving them. One challenge of conducting a content analysis is that it depends on the researcher's interpretation of the content, however in an effort to combat this, details of what type of posts went into each category was provided and this research method was backed up with interviews and surveys.



This research is of benefit to public relations practitioners as it demonstrates how other public relations professionals use social media every day to assist in relationship building, two-way communication, reputation management, content control and word of mouth communication. It demonstrates what type of content that audiences engage with the most and how social media can be used to build stronger relationships with consumers. It shows the importance of engaging with two-way communication on social media as gaining engagement on social media content allows the professional to gather feedback on topics, opinions and the brand. It also demonstrates an effective way to dealing with negativity online and how word of mouth communication can be utilised via social media.

## References

- Almalki, S. (2016). 'Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Data in Mixed Methods Research – Challenges and Benefits' *Journal of Education and Learning*, **5**(3), 288-296. [Accessed 28 June 2019 via Research Gate]
- Antieno, O. (2009). An analysis of the strengths and limitation of qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. *Problems of education in the 21st century*, [online] **13**, 13-18. Available at: [http://www.scientiasocialis.lt/pec/files/pdf/Atieno\\_Vol.13.pdf](http://www.scientiasocialis.lt/pec/files/pdf/Atieno_Vol.13.pdf) [Accessed 29 June 2019]
- Antevenio. (2018). *7 examples of crisis in mismanaged social networks*. [online] Available at: <https://www.antevenio.com/usa/7-examples-of-crisis-in-mismanaged-social-networks/> [Accessed 20 May 2019]
- Archer, C. and Harrigan, P. (2016). Show me the money: how bloggers as stakeholders are challenging theories of relationship building in public relations. *Media International Australia*, **160**(1), 67-77.
- Aronczyk, M., Edwards, L. and Kantola, A. (2017). Apprehending public relations as a promotional industry. *Public Relations Inquiry*, **6**(2), 139-155.
- Bansal, P. (Tima), Smith, W. K. and Vaara, E. (2018) 'New Ways of Seeing through Qualitative Research'. *Academy of Management Journal*, **61**(4), 1189–1195.
- Barry, C., Markey, R., Almquist, E. and Brahm, C. (2011). Putting social media to work. [online] Bain.com. Available at: <https://www.bain.com/insights/putting-social-media-to-work/> [Accessed 11 Jun. 2019].
- Benton, L. (2017). Online reviews can be a major part of your Public Relations (PR) programs. [online] AMA Boston. Available at: <https://amaboston.org/blog/online-reviews-are-powerful-pr-tools/> [Accessed 21 July 2019]
- Boyd, D. M. and Ellison, N. B. (2007). 'Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship'. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, **13**(1), 210-230
- Brahma, M. (2018) 'Times They Are a Changin' in Corporate Communications and Pr', *Global Media Journal: Indian Edition*, **9**(1), 1–6.
- Brenner, M. (2018). What Consumers Want More of at Marketing Events | Marketing Insider Group. [online] Marketing Insider Group. Available at:

<https://marketinginsidergroup.com/content-marketing/what-consumers-want-more-of-at-marketing-events/>

Brody, E. (2003). For public relations success, track results not messages. *Public Relations Quarterly*, **48**(4), 37-38.

BusinessDictionary.com. (2019). *Public relations definition*. [online] Available at: <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/public-relations.html>. [Accessed 21 May 2019]

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2017). Information statistics society - Enterprises 2017. [online] Central Statistics Office. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/iss/informationstatiistics-enterprises2017/> [Accessed 26 May 2019]

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2017). Information Society Statistics - Households 2017. [online] Central Statistics Office. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/iss hh/informationstatiistics-households2017/> [Accessed 26 May 2019]

Davies, M. (2007). *Doing a successful research project: Using qualitative or quantitative measures*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke [England].

Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity*. Oxford University Press, New York.

Driscoll, D., Appiah-Yeboah, A., Salib, P. and Rupert, D. (2007). Merging Qualitative and Quantitative Data in Mixed Methods Research: How To and Why Not. *Ecological and Environment Anthropology*, [online] **3**(1), 19-28. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=icwdmee> [Accessed 19 June 2019]

Edosomwan, S., Prakasan, S. K., Kouame, D., Watson, J. (2011). 'The history of social media and its impact on business'. *The Journal of Applied Management & Entrepreneurship*, **16**(3), 79-91

Elmer, G. (2015). Going Public on Social Media. *Social Media + Society*, **1**(1), 1-2.

Fisher, S. (2019). 3 Great Examples of Crisis Management on Social Media. [online] Resources.mojomedialabs.com. Available at:

<https://resources.mojomedialabs.com/blog/3-great-examples-of-crisis-management-on-social-media> [Accessed 24 May 2019]

Fitch, K. (2017) 'Seeing 'the unseen hand': Celebrity, promotion and public relations', *Public Relations Inquiry*, **6**(2), 157–169.

Flick, U., Kardoff, E. and Steinke, I. (2004). A companion to qualitative research. SAGE, London.

Ghosh, A., Varshney, S., Venugopal, P. (2014) 'Social media WOM: Definition, Consequences and Inter-relationships', *Management and Labour Studies*, **39**(3), 293-308.

Gibson, D., Gonzales, J. L. and Castanon, J. (2006) 'The Importance of Reputation and the Role of Public Relations', *Public Relations Quarterly*, **51**(3), 15–18.

Graneheim, U., Lindgren, B. and Lundman, B. (2017). Methodological challenges in qualitative content analysis: A discussion paper. *Nurse Education Today*, **56**,29-34.

Gürcü, M.and Korkmaz, S., (2018). The importance of word of mouth communications on healthcare marketing and its influence on consumers' intention to use healthcare. *International Journal of Health Management and Tourism*, **3**(1), 1-22.

Hsieh, H. and Shannon, S. (2005). Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, **15**(9), 1277-1288.

Jick, T. D., (2008). 'Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: Triangulation in Action', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **24**(4), 602-611. [Accessed June 28 2019 via Jstor).

Johnson, R. B. and Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004) 'Mixed Methods Research: A Research Paradigm Whose Time Has Come', *Educational Researcher*, **33**(7), 14–26.

Kane, E. and Brún, M. (2001). Doing your own research. Marion Boyars, London.

Kaplan, A. and Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, **53**(1), 59-68.

Kaul, A., Chaudhri, V., Cherian, D., Freberg, K., Mishra, S., Kumar, R.,

- Pridmore, J., Lee, S., Rana, N., Majmudar, U. and Carroll, C. (2015). Social Media: The New Mantra for Managing Reputation. *Vikalpa*, **40**(4), 455-491.
- Kennedy, A. K. and Sommerfeldt, E. J. (2015) 'A Postmodern Turn for Social Media Research: Theory and Research Directions for Public Relations Scholarship', *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, **23**(1), 31–45.
- Kesavan, R., Bernacchi, M. and Mascarenhas, O. (2013). Word of Mouse: CSR Communication and the Social Media. *International Management Review*, [online] **9**(1), 59 - 67. Available at: <http://scholarspress.us/journals/IMR/pdf/IMR-1-2013/v9n113-art6.pdf> [Accessed 12 Jun. 2019].
- Khang, H., Ki, E.-J. and Ye, L. (2012) 'Social Media Research in Advertising, Communication, Marketing, and Public Relations, 1997–2010', *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, **89**(2), 279–298.
- Levy, R. N. (2002) 'Value-Added Public Relations', *Public Relations Quarterly*, **47**(4), 34.
- Madrigal, D. and McClain, B. (2012). Strengths and Weaknesses of Quantitative and Qualitative Research : UXmatters. [online] Uxmatters.com. Available at: <https://www.uxmatters.com/mt/archives/2012/09/strengths-and-weaknesses-of-quantitative-and-qualitative-research.php> [Accessed 20 June 2019]
- Maxwell, J. (2015). Expanding the History and Range of Mixed Methods Research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 10(1), pp.12-27.
- Mergel, I. (2017) 'Building Holistic Evidence for Social Media Impact', *Public Administration Review*, 77(4), pp. 489–495.
- Miller, D., Costa, E., Haynes, N., McDonald, T., Nicolescu, R., Spyer, J., Venkatraman, S. and Wang, X. ed., (2016). What is social media? In: *How the World changed Social Media*. [online] UCL Press. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24750000> [Accessed via JSTOR [Accessed 31 May 2019].
- Mudd, J. (2013). Public Relations and Journalism: Can They Play Well Together? [online] Axiapr.com. Available at: <https://www.axiapr.com/blog/public-relations-journalism-can-they-play-well-together> [Accessed 2 June 2019]

Newman, I. and Benz, C. (1998). *Qualitative - Quantitative Research Methodology: Exploring the Interactive Continuum*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

Papasolomou, I. and Melanthiou, Y. (2012) 'Social Media: Marketing Public Relations' New Best Friend', *Journal of Promotion Management*, 18(3), pp. 319–328.

Phillips, D. (2008) 'The Psychology of Social Media', *Journal of New Communications Research*, 3(1), pp.79-85.

Pincus, J., Rimmer, T., Rayfield, R. and Cropp, F. (1993). Newspaper Editors' Perceptions of Public Relations: How Business, News, and Sports Editors Differ. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 5(1), pp.27-45.

Public Relations Society of America. (2012). All About PR - Public Relations Society of America. [online] Available at: <https://www.prsa.org/all-about-pr/> [Accessed 29 Jul. 2019].

Rokka, J., Karlsson, K. and Tienari, J. (2014). Balancing acts: Managing employees and reputation in social media. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 30(7-8), pp.802-827.

Smith, B. and Place, K. (2013) 'Integrating Power? Evaluating Public Relations Influence in an Integrated Communication Structure', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 25(2), pp. 168–187

Solis., B. and Breakenridge., D. (2009). *Putting the Public Back in Public Relations*. New Jersey: Pearson India.

Stephen, A. and Galak, J. (2012). The Effects of Traditional and Social Earned Media on Sales: A Study of a Microlending Marketplace. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 49(5), pp.624-639.

Strauss, A. Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Thousand oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Stuckey, H. (2013). Three types of interviews: Qualitative research methods in social health. *Journal of Social Health and Diabetes*, 01(02), pp.056-059.

Tashakkori, A. and Teddlie, C. (2008). 'Introduction to Mixed Method and Mixed Model Studies in the Social and Behavioural Sciences' in Plano Clark, V. L. and Creswell, J.

W. (eds) *The Mixed Methods Reader*. 1st edition. Los Angeles, London, New Dehli, Singapore: Sage Publications. Pp. 7-21

Theunissen, P. (2015). The Quantum Entanglement of Dialogue and Persuasion in Social Media: Introducing the Per–Di Principle. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 23(1), pp.5-18.

Varbanov, R. (2015) 'The Potential of Social Media for the Business of Companies', *Business Management / Biznes Upravljenje*, 25(3), pp. 5–28.

Weber, R. (1990). *Basic content analysis*. 2nd ed. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage.

WhatIs.com. (2019). What is social media? - Definition from WhatIs.com. [online] Available at: <https://whatIs.techtarget.com/definition/social-media> [Accessed 19 May 2019]

Wigley, S. and Zhang, W. (2011). A Study of PR Practitioners' Use of Social Media in Crisis Planning. *Public Relations Journal*, 5(3).

## **APPENDIX I - Interview questions**

1. How often do you use social media in your work life as a PR practitioner?
2. Which social media networks (if any) do you use within your work life?
3. Which social media networks do you find most effective?
4. How does social media fit into your public relations/communications strategy?
5. For what reason do you use social media for the most?
6. Do you use social media to combat negative comments/publicity?
7. What percentage of your social media activity is spent managing negative comments or complaints?
8. Some of the research I've done has said that social media gave a level of content control back to PR/communication practitioners, would you agree with that?
9. What would be your preferred way of communicating with your audience? (eg radio, print, social media?)
10. Would you say social media as a tool within PR is:
  1. Important
  2. Somewhat important
  3. Very Important



11. Why in your view is social media important/not important in PR?

## Appendix II - Survey Questions

- 1) How often do you use social media in your work life as a PR practitioner?
  - a) Never
  - b) Once a week
  - c) 1-2 times a week
  - d) Once a month
  - e) Everyday
- 2) Which social media networks (if any) do you use within your work life?
  - a) Facebook
  - b) Twitter
  - c) Instagram
  - d) All
- 3) Which social media networks do you find most effective?
  - a) Facebook
  - b) Twitter
  - c) Instagram
  - d) All
- 4) For what reason do you use social media for the most?
  - a) As a platform to communicate products/services
  - b) Two-way communication with consumers
  - c) Crisis management
  - d) Complaints management

- e) Build relationships with your audience
- 5) Do you use social media to combat negative comments/publicity?
- a) Yes
  - b) No
- 6) What percentage of your social media activity is spent managing negative comments or complaints?
- a) >5%
  - b) 5-10%
  - c) 10%-20%
  - d) 20-30%
  - e) 30-40%
  - f) 40-50%
  - g) 50-60%
  - h) 60-70%
  - i) 70-80%
  - j) 80-90%
  - k) 90-100%
- 7) Please rate in order of priority, your preferred medium for communication with your audience (with 1 being the most preferred and 5 the least preferred),
- a) Social media
  - b) Online news media
  - c) Print news media
  - d) Television news media

e) Radio news media

8) Would you say social media as a tool within PR is:

a) Not important

b) Somewhat important

c) Very important

9) Why in your view is social media important/not important in PR? (300 words max).

## **Appendix III – Consent Form example**

### **Consent Form**

#### **‘A study to examine the role of social media within public relations’.**

You are invited to take part in this research into ‘A study to examine the role of social media within public relations’.

The research aims to examine and understand the role that social media plays within public relations. This research will be of benefit as it draws on the experience of public relations/marketing practitioners who are working at a time when social media is such a big tool for businesses. This research provides an opportunity to hear a group of working public relations/marketing practitioners perspectives.

The research will be conducted by Elaine O’Neill from Griffith College, Dublin in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MA in Journalism and Public Relations at Griffith College, Dublin.

Should you choose to participate in this research, your involvement will consist of participating in the following activities:

1. A 15-20-minute interview regarding social media use within public relations

The information that is collected as part of this research will be treated in the strictest of confidence. Your anonymity will be protected, and your data will not be identifiable at any point during the research process or in any version of results submitted for publication or presentation. You will not be asked to provide your name or any other identifying information. There will be no way of identifying your responses in the data files.

All information will be converted to numbers for statistical analysis and stored securely on the encrypted researcher’s laptop and a backup encrypted USB memory stick. No person, other than the researcher will have access to the data. All information gathered will be destroyed within 24 months.

Results will be sent to the examining board at Griffith College, Dublin. Versions of the results may be submitted for publication to journals and presented at appropriate conferences. Results will be available to you upon request.

If you could please indicate your consent to participate in this research by ticking the boxes and signing the form below, I would appreciate it.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information above and have had an opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I can withdraw my input at any stage.	
I understand that participation in this study involves engaging in the 15-20-minute interview that will be recorded and transcribed.	
I understand that at no time will any identifiable information about me be present in any of the research or subsequent reports or presentations.	
I agree to the use of anonymous quotes in this report.	
I understand that the information gathered as part of this research will be destroyed after graduation, or in 24 months, whichever is sooner.	
I understand the information I provide will be used for the sole purpose of this study.	

If you have any questions about this research, please contact:  
Elaine O'Neill: elaineoneill97@gmail.com (researcher)

Signature:

Printed Name:

Date:

Signature of Researcher:

---

## **Consent Form**

### **'A study to examine the role of social media within public relations'.**

You are invited to take part in this research into **'A study to examine the role of social media within public relations'.**

The research aims to examine and understand the role that social media plays within public relations. This research will be of benefit as it draws on the experience of public relations/marketing practitioners who are working at a time when social media is such a big tool for businesses. This research provides an opportunity to hear a group of working public relations/marketing practitioners perspectives.

The research will be conducted by Elaine O'Neill from Griffith College, Dublin in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MA in Journalism and Public Relations at Griffith College, Dublin.

Should you choose to participate in this research, your involvement will consist of participating in the following activities:

1. A 15-20 minute interview regarding social media use within public relations

The information that is collected as part of this research will be treated in the strictest of confidence. Your anonymity will be protected and your data will not be identifiable at any point during the research process or in any version of results submitted for publication or presentation. You will not be asked to provide your name or any other identifying information. There will be no way of identifying your responses in the data files.

All information will be converted to numbers for statistical analysis and stored securely on the encrypted researcher's laptop and a backup encrypted USB memory stick. No person, other than the researcher will have access to the data. All information gathered will be destroyed within 24 months.

Results will be sent to the examining board at Griffith College, Dublin. Versions of the results may be submitted for publication to journals and presented at appropriate conferences. Results will be available to you upon request.

If you could please indicate your consent to participate in this research by ticking the boxes and signing the form below, I would appreciate it.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information above and have had an opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can withdraw my input at any stage.	
I understand that participation in this study involves engaging in the 15-20 minute interview that will be recorded and transcribed.	
I understand that at no time will any identifiable information about me be present in any of the research or subsequent reports or presentations.	
I agree to the use of anonymous quotes in this report.	
I understand that the information gathered as part of this research will be destroyed after graduation, or in 24 months, whichever is sooner.	
I understand the information I provide will be used for the sole purpose of this study.	

If you have any questions about this research, please contact:

Elaine O'Neill: elaineoneill97@gmail.com (researcher)

Signature: 

Printed Name: NESSA FITZGIBBON

Date: 24/7/2019

Signature of Researcher: 



## **APPENDIX IV**

### **Interview 1 - 18 July 2019**

[00:00:02.840] - Interviewee 1

Hopefully that picks it up.

[00:00:04.860] - Researcher

Yeah hopefully. Anyway, so I just want to first of all like how often would you use social media in your work life, would it be every day?

[00:00:12.110] - Interviewee 1

Every day, every day. Yeah. Every day multiple times a day. Yeah.

[00:00:15.650] - Researcher

Yeah. And would you use Facebook Instagram Twitter, would you use all of them?

[00:00:21.140] - Interviewee 1

Yes. Yeah. From a work perspective. If we're talking about from our brands. Yeah, it's all three channels Facebook Twitter and Instagram.

[00:00:30.060] - Researcher

Yeah.

[00:00:32.160] - Interviewee 1

And depending on the the brand or the station, the focus on the channels can be different. So, say at the moment there's a big focus for all of us on Instagram because we're all trying to grow Instagram with the algorithms constantly changing on Facebook that becomes more of a challenge for engagement. On Twitter we use kind of more as an influence a real time channel just to what's coming up on the show, a guest has just said this, but Instagram is kind of what we call the channel of choice at the moment.

[00:01:02.630] - Researcher

Yeah. So, you'd find that the most effective at the minute.

[00:01:06.410] - Interviewee 1

Yeah. So, for example we go to the social media where our audience are and at the moment most of them are spending their time most of their time on Instagram. And so particularly for the brand. So today fm, 98, Spin and Spin Southwest, the age demographic of those audiences range from about 15 to 40. So, a huge percentage of the younger cohort of that demographic are on Instagram. That's where we are.

[00:01:37.070] - Researcher

So, would you kind of schedule like what social media posts you do?

[00:01:41.930] - Interviewee 1

Yes. So, it's a mixture of both. So, we have an always on approach to social media. So, within all of our brands there is a dedicated social media monitor and their job solely is to is to monitor moderate, curate, create all the content on social media. Their objective is to grow engagement and to grow reach and grow following to a lesser extent because we know now it's actually about engagement. So, it's quality over quantity. Obviously, the follower numbers are important.

[00:02:15.340] - Researcher

Yes.

[00:02:15.810] - Interviewee 1

And but to a lesser extent than they used to be it is about engagement with that key audience and trying to engage the audience that you want. So yes, while there would be it's a 24/7 approach seven days a week to all of our social media so there would be scheduled content.

[00:02:34.410] - Researcher

Yeah.

[00:02:34.530] - Interviewee 1

So, on Facebook probably more so where it's kind of longer form content might be a podcast or a show from the week we want you to listen back to an interesting article. But it's mainly in real time it's live posting because we are live radio. So, we're always online that's probably where we differ to other brands. We are content led. We have so much content here. But it's actually less about scheduling.

[00:02:59.890] - Researcher

Yeah.

[00:03:00.260] - Interviewee 1

And so, our content is planned on a weekly and daily basis.

[00:03:04.610] - Researcher

Okay.

[00:03:05.420] - Researcher

And so, as you say like with engagement would you track what content gets the highest amount of engagement?

[00:03:12.740] - Interviewee 1

Yes certainly. Yes. So we would have show led content which is obviously content that's taken place in one of our shows on station and then we have brand led content. So that content to Today F.M. itself creates whether that's video content or a particular campaign we're running on from a show perspective it could be a really good podcast with a guest. And it could be a video dash the presenters themselves have created particularly for Today FM AM presenter like video content is really key because personality is a big part of our brand. So we track our engagement across and within content and audio content whether that's video or audio or ground or listen back.

[00:03:55.170] - Researcher

And so, would you say then that's the reason you use social media, would it be building relationships with your audience?

[00:04:05.580] - Interviewee 1

Absolutely. So, it's it's building meaningful relationships with your audience, building a connection, engaging with your audience. What we always say is we go to where our audience is.

[00:04:17.530] - Researcher

Yes.

[00:04:17.910] - Interviewee 1

So, wherever that is we aim to be there and wherever they choose to consume or engage with us that's where we are. So it's similar to we have an app where you can you can listen live on the app or you can listen on F.M. radio or you listen in your car or you listen on your desktop or work on similarly our social media must reflect what you hear on air, presenters that you hear on air the content that we're talking about. And it's about making sure that the content fits that channel. So, you were talking about scheduling there. So, the content that we would putting on Instagram would be very different at the content we would have on Facebook would be very different to the content we have on Twitter as people consume those channels and those platforms in a very different way. Yes.

[00:05:00.650] - Researcher

Okay. And do you ever use social media for say like combating negative negative comments or negative publicity?

[00:05:08.970] - Interviewee 1

Because of the nature of what we do which is live radio. Yes, we are going to get negative comments, so it could be the comments a presenter has made on the radio, a guest that they had on that might be a little bit controversial in the comments that this made you something that the station has done. You know if we changed a presenter and people didn't like it, if people had a to complaint to make if they had a bad experience they generally will take to social media and what we do is we discuss, and we will get back to absolutely every one of them. So, we never leave a comment unresponded to. We don't just leave it there. We will always have a response. Usually it would be that we would take it off line and say you know drop us an e-mail us at or DM us to give us your number and we will always get back to them with the full response with the name to resolve it.

[00:06:02.250] - Researcher

And do you think that's an effective way of dealing with it?

[00:06:04.700] - Interviewee 1

Absolutely absolutely. Apart from that I mean you judge them on a case by case basis it would completely depend on what the subject matter was. I mean if it's just people trolling and looking divisive you ignore that, and you can see that you know you just have to look at somebodies profile you have to look at the type of comments and content they've engaged with in the past.

[00:06:26.760] - Interviewee 1

But if they're genuine comments on concerns and criticisms or issues we would like to respond to those. Yeah. We never just leave them hanging because the nature of what we do is you know radio is too way and it's all about our listeners and our audience and so we engage with them all of the time. We don't kind of run away from that.

[00:06:43.950] - Researcher

Yeah and if you were to say like a percentage of time how much time you spent engaging with them comments.

[00:06:52.140] - Interviewee 1

From an issues point of view?

[00:06:53.160] - Researcher

Yeah.

[00:06:53.670] - Interviewee 1

Oh thankfully, thankfully, that's very rare. You know it could be like 5 percent of the time it's really only if you know something major was to prop up or has been in the newspapers but thankfully not on a lot on a frequent basis at all. But we're prepared for it when it does happen.

[00:07:11.100] - Researcher

Yeah. And in some of the research that I've done it's kind of said that social media has given content control back to marketing people and PR people like would you agree with that?

[00:07:22.860] - Interviewee 1

See, I think what's great about it is it's given us a new communications tools. So, it's yet another method of communicating with your audience. What I love about it is it's so timely and agile. So, if you can get your message out to your audience in a much faster more controlled manner. So whereby before if say you had you know whether it's a press release or statement and you need to get it out to consumers or your audience and you do it via the traditional media you send a press release and you hope that they print it, you send it to the stations and you hope that it's read on the news bulletins. Whereas now if you have put the groundwork in to building that audience and building your engagement you can distribute that message in real time and actually monitor the responses and get back from there and then I always think it's a it must be brilliant for anybody seeing the kind of customer services industry because it's a really great way of if you're not a bricks and mortar store and so many aren't like online retailers. It's a really great way. To interact with your audience and to address any concerns they have there and then uncertainty yes control the message because excuse me there's a there's a person behind the keyboard controlling that message here. So, I think it's only been a good thing.

[00:08:48.630] - Researcher

So, if you had a preference in the kind of tool that you use to get your message out would it be social media. Would it be, Well you're obviously in radio sector...

[00:09:01.300] - Interviewee 1

Yes. So again, it will completely depend on what that message was here. Well it would be on air first because you have the business we are in so it would be on radio and then it would be online on social media. So online on Today Fm.com and on social media.

[00:09:17.350] - Interviewee 1

Yes. And then it might be traditional media depending on what that news is. And you know it is but it's a massive part of what we do, and we invest in it as well. Yes.

[00:09:27.060] - Researcher

And so, then if you were to rate social media as not important, someone important or very important,

[00:09:34.580] - Interviewee 1

Very important.

[00:09:35.550] - Researcher

OK. And why would you say that?

[00:09:36.850] - Interviewee 1

It's very important for the business we're in. I mean essentially we're in the business of communications. We're in the business of entertainment. We are a live brand a live radio product. Therefore, because social media is always on 24/7. And that's where our audience are. You know I kind of don't know what we did before. So, the idea is like an extension of radio. Something.

[00:10:34.560] - Researcher

So that's all of my questions really. That's great, Thanks for that. (RECORDING CUT OFF)

## **APPENDIX V**

### **Interview 2 - 22nd July 2019**

[00:00:39.280] - Interviewee 2

Hello there

[00:00:39.280] - Researcher

Hi (NAME). How are you you?

[00:00:41.440] - Interviewee 2

Grand grand. You're working away anyway.

[00:00:44.820] - Researcher

Yeah, I am, I'm in the last few weeks of getting it done

[00:00:50.180] - Interviewee 2

Yeah and when do you have to have it in for?

[00:00:50.710] - Researcher

The first of August so it's not even weeks is 10 days really.

[00:00:54.430] - Interviewee 2

Oh my God the pressure is on.

[00:00:56.620] - Researcher

Yeah, I know it's really getting stressful now. But anyway, I'll get it done eventually

[00:01:00.480] - Interviewee 2

Come here, I have free calls do you want me to ring you back.

[00:01:03.490] - Researcher

No, your grand I've free calls as well.

[00:01:04.760] - Interviewee 2

Are you sure.



[00:01:06.460] - Researcher

Yeah. Thanks.

[00:01:08.250] - Interviewee 2

OK.

[00:01:09.700] - Researcher

Are you OK If I record you?

[00:01:12.300] - Interviewee 2

Yeah.

[00:01:13.090] - Researcher

Yeah. It's just for me really to write it up in the end.

[00:01:16.060] - Interviewee 2

Yeah. And I hope I hope I'm some use to you.

[00:01:21.870] - Researcher

It's just about social media use really and its importance.

[00:01:32.710] - Researcher

So yeah I have to ask you what what is your official job title.

[00:01:37.650] - Interviewee 2

I'm press and communications officer with the (COMPANY).

[00:01:47.440] - Researcher

It'll all be anonymous anyway, it's just the title.

[00:01:53.630] - Researcher

OK so the first question is how often would you use social media like it in your work, like would it be every day or,

[00:02:02.080] - Interviewee 2

Its everyday yeah.

[00:02:02.080] - Researcher

And which social media networks would you use.

[00:02:12.400] - Interviewee 2

Primarily we use Facebook and Twitter.

[00:02:19.730] - Researcher

OK perfect.

[00:02:21.790] - Interviewee 2

And we use whatsapp

[00:02:23.150] - Researcher

And do you find like any if you like.

[00:02:25.300] - Interviewee 2

That's like apart from our websites. Yeah.

[00:02:27.880] - Researcher

Oh yeah

[00:02:29.150] - Interviewee 2

OK yeah.

[00:02:30.460] - Researcher

And would you find like Facebook or Twitter. Which one would be more effective. Or do you find any of them more effective than the other.

[00:02:39.730] - Interviewee 2

Well. We. I think it's important when you're using social media to kind of be aware of your audience. We're farming organisations so if there's an older demographic. Yes. So it's kind of like you know it was hard enough getting them to go to text messages not knowing anything else. You know we're kind of at. Facebook works both Facebook and

Twitter work well for Facebook is more for our members and then Twitter is more for kind of getting our message out to a broader audience not just our members.

[00:03:22.290] - Researcher

OK. Yeah.

[00:03:30.430] - Researcher

And so for what reason would you say that use social media to most?

[00:03:37.110] - Interviewee 2

The reason,.. just to let people make people aware of what we're actually doing. So I mean we have several audiences so we would have our membership. We're a membership organization so we would like to know our membership know what we're doing. We also want to attract new members. So we also like to let our competitors members know what we're doing. Shall we say. And just to reach as many people as possible to do so. And the range of issues that we cover.

[00:04:16.240] - Interviewee 2

And so in farming there would be a broad range. We would look after both beef farmers and sheep producers. So it's a broad range of issues. So we and also to kind of so we would use it kind of grow our membership. Yes. Also to publicize events that we have. Like if we have farm walks going on or those kinds of things just to reach as many people as we can. In a particular area. And then again you have to come in to kind of directing your social media a certain target group which is important and certain geographic and demographic group.

[00:05:05.430] - Researcher

Yeah.

[00:05:08.120] - Interviewee 2

And then why else would we use it for, we would use it to kind of to engage with with our members and to get feedback. And you know oftentimes we would know what subjects or what topical issues are most affecting our members and stuff by the feedback that we get by the interaction that we get on these platforms. And the reaction we get from them. And then because a lot of the stuff that we would put up on social

media put out would, we would get radio interviews and stuff from. So, and if something had that kind of is a broad broad audience a way of reaching a broad audience as well. So, it's kind of a good way of engaging which are the most pertinent issues that we cover or what exactly is on people's minds on any one day.

[00:06:15.060] - Researcher

Yeah. And would you, would you ever have to use social media to combat like kind of negative comments or negative publicity?

[00:06:27.970] - Interviewee 2

Well I think there's a certain amount of negative comments that comes with with any social media. We tend not get to many and we tend not to come back to much publicly kind of. There are certainly people that we will maybe contact privately. Yeah. But because it's to be expected.

[00:07:00.820] - Interviewee 2

We work in a lobbying political sphere like one lobby group for farmers. So not everybody's going to have the same position or the same opinions as us so a certain amount of negative feedback is always to be expected. But we don't usually we would normally like kind of have spats with people on social media. We will try and avoid as much as possible.

[00:07:32.250] - Researcher

Yeah. So, you wouldn't you wouldn't spend a huge amount of time doing that. Barely any really.

[00:07:39.430] - Researcher

Barely any yeah.

[00:07:40.590] - Researcher

Yeah.

[00:07:42.700] - Interviewee 2

But then you see that's the broader thing as well. Because we represent farmers so there is a broader kind of battle going on on social media at the moment which is kind of

anti-farming anti red meat anti livestock production or animal rights activists' animal rights, vegans and yes, some climate change activists. So, we would use it instead of engaging with it directly we just focus on promoting argument against their positions on our own platforms.

[00:08:20.770] - Researcher

Okay yeah.

[00:08:21.760] - Interviewee 2

Yeah.

[00:08:23.980] - Interviewee 2

You know we would we would kind of counter it by putting out accurate information about you know livestock and climate change or the benefits of red meat to a vegan diet and those comments, but we wouldn't go head to head with them directly on social media.

[00:08:43.570] - Interviewee 2

Yeah but we have arranged meetings with people in the past who have tried to try and resolve it that way. Yeah.

[00:08:54.440] - Researcher

Okay so well some of the research I did has said like that social media has given content control back to point of press and communications people. Would you think that's true or,.

[00:09:15.330] - Interviewee 2

I do it to a certain extent. If it's direct as well and if it reaches the right people. Yeah. Your target audience. You know you can make all the contact in the world and when you're a handful of people will see it. So, it does have to be directed well. And then you know it's very busy out there on social media networks so there's always the possibility that things will get missed. So, you do have to have good visuals and back it up with really good content or else and be directed or its just shooting out into the stratosphere with no plan or no aim.

[00:10:01.750] - Researcher

Yeah, I know what you mean.

[00:10:04.260] - Researcher

So, if you had if you had like a preferred medium for communicating with your audience would it be social media, or would it be print news or television radio.

[00:10:16.010] - Interviewee 2

Well because of the demographic that we are working with yes, we still rely on traditional media a lot because farmers are you know the average age is 55 plus. Yeah. So, they're not early adopters to new technology. We have introduced WhatsApp in counties and in our committees and stuff like that. So that's working well. Yes. But we do we do rely heavily as well on traditional media particularly print and radio. Yeah local radio especially because there will be farming shows on local radio so be good for us to be involved on those.

[00:11:04.890] - Researcher

Yes.

[00:11:06.000] - Interviewee 2

We've done so many focus groups which would suggest if you ask them do they go on our website, do they go on our Facebook, to our Twitter to. Then they might say no. And invariably they all say they listen to their local radio. Oh okay. So, but that's just our particular demographic. Likewise, they like reading about their farm or in their local papers so. And but we're very lucky in. Particular in the agri environment because we have national national newspapers that we can use for this which is the Farmers Journal and the farming independent. Both of those are very important.

[00:11:52.050] - Interviewee 2

But then we also have really good online Ag media now and the most important one of all would be a website called agri land. Yeah. And that is purely an online platform but more and more and more people are going to agri land for their news. So we're kind of in a well we still rely on traditional media but we're trying more and more to move as our audience moves more and more onto digital and online.

[00:12:26.610] - Interviewee 2

We're kind of moving. Yeah and television is always important. For instance, we had a protest outside a meat processing factory a couple of weeks ago and Kiran movie from RTÉ covered it and it was on the lunchtime news the 6 o'clock news at the 9 o'clock news. And that was great coverage for an organization like us because. You always know that the news programs are gonna be you know watched heavily in big numbers and it's great. Always a great opportunity to get your message out and your brand out.

[00:13:08.930] - Researcher

Yeah. Yeah. So, then I'm just looking at my question.

[00:13:16.540] - Interviewee 2

No that's OK.

[00:13:18.150] - Interviewee 2

Events events are important as well and like events you know it would be important for us, social media does not remove the need to have events to have face to face contact with your members or your audience with actual events is still important to us.

[00:13:36.710] - Researcher

Yes.

[00:13:38.010] - Researcher

So then.

[00:13:40.180] - Researcher

So, if you had to rate social media as a tool would you say it's not important, somewhat important or very important?

[00:13:50.400] - Interviewee 2

So not important. What was the other one.

[00:13:52.770] - Researcher

Somewhat important or very important.

[00:13:55.860] - Interviewee 2

I'd say it's very important because it's just growing in importance all the time. I would say very important definitely.

[00:14:04.560] - Researcher

And then last question is, why do you think it's important?

[00:14:07.080] - Interviewee 2

Because it allows you to reach beyond your traditional audience and allows you to engage with more people and to get feedback to build your brand, name recognition, to highlight issues. It's got so many benefits and there isn't so much scope with it particularly for video content and you know and it and for the constant news like the good news is kind of a new 24-hour news cycle. So, it works great for farming independent will come out on a Tuesday and the farmers journal would come out at on a Thursday, traditional media and we say much more kind of time regulated than social media. So, whenever a story breaks we can be on top but we know we can get our message out, but we don't have to wait for the traditional forms of media. So, we can react in a timely fashion as well to breaking stuff with them.

[00:15:34.810] - Researcher

That's all my questions. Thanks for doing that (NAME).



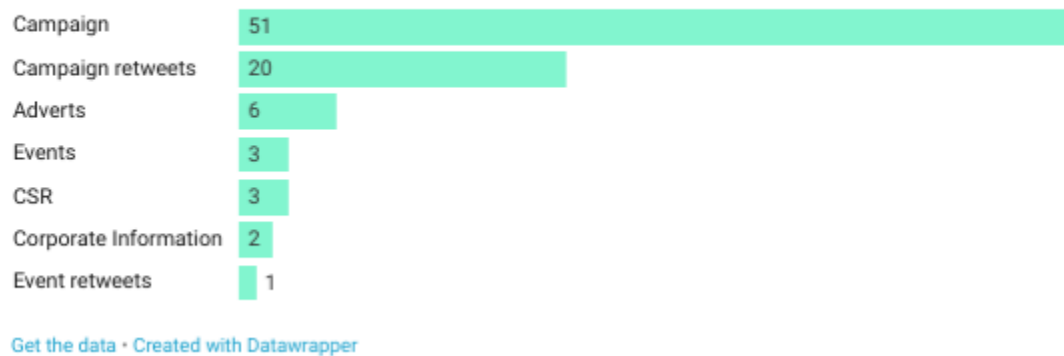
## APPENDIX VI

### Company B - Subcategories



## APPENDIX VII

### Company B - All social media platforms content analysis



## APPENDIX VIII

### Company C - Subcategories

