

DESIGNING A CONCEPTUAL DIGITAL COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK TO SUIT LUXURY FASHION BRANDS



Introduction and purpose of the study

Situated in a geographically remote Southern hemisphere, South African fashion designers have a tough choice to either move to Europe or North America to find their way amongst the iconic, established, and influential fashion houses, or to work hard and smart to create and build their unique brands through the African fashion system to the point where they generate enough interest to move into the broader international fashion industry.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to suggest a digital communication framework to suit South African fashion brands in their journey to global success.

Literature review

A theoretical framework is constructed as background for a specific research project and serves to document source theories of concepts and constructs in a specific research project (Meredith, 1993:4). In this case the source theories that will be used to construct the framework are reputation and brand management, as well as stakeholder relationship management, combined with digital communication. The context is the South African fashion industry.

Digital media platforms are increasingly considered the primary source of information for consumers and one of the most powerful marketing tools for fashion retailers. It provides an interactive mass communication channel to amplify marketing strategies for fashion brands. It attracts new customers by offering information about fashion and brands while keeping loyal customers by offering new channels for advertising (Shu-Chuan & Yoo-Kyoung 2020).

The Department of Trade Industry and Competition (DTIC) with the South African Cotton Cluster (SACC) found that the South African fashion industry before Covid-19 contributed R1 billion to the GDP in 2019 (Jadezweni, 2020). The ability of fashion designers to adapt will help brands to remain relevant to the needs of their market (Business Insider SA, 2020), and ensure their financial sustainability post the pandemic (Moloi-Motsepe, 2020).

Methodology (for conceptual papers)

This qualitative study will be working in the interpretivist paradigm to incorporate a systematic literature review to analyse published peer-reviewed academic articles no older than 5 years, in order to suggest a digital communication framework to suit South African fashion brands in their journey to global success (Bezuidenhout & Strydom 2021; Snyder 2019).

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The systematic literature review will enable the researchers to develop a conceptual framework on the influence of digital communication on the success of the reputation and relationship management of fashion brands within the challenging global fashion marketplace (Snyder 2019). Articles will be sourced based on the key concepts of the study: digital communication, stakeholder relationship management and reputation management, within the context of the fashion industry.

Practical and social implications of such a framework would be to assist the fashion industry to expand their influence and create more opportunities for young designers to succeed through the application of strategic communication principles in their businesses.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



DR HELENA VAN WYK

Dr Helena Van Wyk, is the Academic Head at the IMM Graduate School Parktown. She has completed her PhD in Communication with a focus on brand communication. Her research interests are strategic communication with a focus on brand.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



NEELTJE DU PLESSIS

Neeltje is currently an independent researcher and does research in Strategic Communication Management, and CSR.

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USING THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT TO ENHANCE CONVERSATION AND LEARNING AMONGST EMERGING COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS



Today's communication environment has become a space filled with different learning possibilities and new ways of developing learners in education. According to Mihailidis and Cohen (2013:01), today's changing media landscape has altered the way learners access, analyse, critically evaluate, and consume information. These individuals have increasingly made use of social online aggregators and mobile applications in their daily lives to engage, interact and build their social networking and professional circle. Online platforms such as Blackboard Collaborate, Microsoft Teams, zoom, Google Classroom and even WhatsApp video conferencing were forced upon South Africans during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, these digital spaces had become 'mute' – in other words a very lonely conversational space. Contribution and participation, unless pushed were non-existent and the facilitators were left talking to a black hole. According to Rovai (2007), higher education learners, cannot learn in isolation, and productive and engaging discussion forums will provide students with a community, where they are able to feel a sense of connectedness and the commitment to learn.

Today's youth have used technology and digital spaces to "supplement their face-to-face encounters" (Boyd, 2014: 5), and this has altered the thinking, learning and pedagogical approach amongst these individuals (Mihailidis and Cohen, 2013). Through qualitative and quantitative analysis, the study analyzed the use of Blackboard's discussion forum and the use of WhatsApp groups as an educational and conversational learning space. The study found that while face-to-face engagement was traditionally an ideal learning conversational space, the online digital environment made learners more comfortable with sharing, critiquing and contributing to discussions.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



RIFQAH ABRAHAMS

My name is Rifqah Abrahams, Lecturer in the Media Studies Department at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). I hold a Master's Degree in Public Relations & Communications from CPUT. I have been in the academic space for more than 10 years teaching in the Public Relations and Journalism Programme. My work revolves around Media Studies, Service & work Integrated learning, Media Law, Communication. I am currently working on my PhD in Media and Communications. I have worked on many projects including the Cape Town International Jazz Festival, Western Province Rugby and many exhibitions and events. I have also worked on many community service projects and school language programmes. I have extensive experience in digital design, social media, IT and writing.

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CULTURAL FUNCTIONALITY, AI IDENTITY AND PARA-SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE IN AI AVATAR BRAND MARKETING IN SERVICE INDUSTRIES IN GHANA



The potential of artificial intelligence to revolutionise the service industry is crucially understudied in the African setting despite its importance. Research reveals that businesses are amplifying their decision-making process and focusing marketing plans through the usage of AI-based solutions, which is why there is an increase in customer connection with AI avatars or chatbots (e.g. De Andrade & Tumelero, 2022; Stone et al., 2020). Again, there is a dearth of research on the functional features of AI avatars from a culture and identity perspective, particularly in the Ghanaian setting. This study focuses on the convergence of culture, brand experience, and how perceived traits contribute to customer trust and para-social interaction with AI service avatars, drawing on para-social interaction theory and identity literature. Data on AI service avatars from customer-based services and users of the technology will be gathered through document analysis and qualitative surveys to provide insights into how consumer-brand relationships are established with users of AI service avatars. This study will be guided by the following questions:

1. How have AI service avatars been culturally branded and identified through their features and application?
2. How do users perceive the features of the AI service avatars and how do the features reflect para-social interaction?

This study is essential to understanding AI's function in marketing communication as well as how AI reflects itself as a cultural entity and an identity that shapes the brand of an organisation. Future implications for AI and brand marketing will be examined as well as recommendations given.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



BELINDA OSEI-MENSAH

Belinda Osei-Mensah is an assistant research fellow at the Centre for Communication Education Research and Professional Development and a PhD student in the Department of Strategic Communication, University of Education, Winneba. Her research interests are an intersection between strategic communication and culture, tourism and innovative technology, especially in Africa, and Ghana. Her recent publication reviewed artificial intelligence and its future research direction for public relations, marketing communication and customer relationship. She holds an MPhil. in Communication and Media Studies from the University of Education, Winneba, where she teaches undergraduate courses like Digital Media and Technology, Gender and Strategic Communication. She is affiliated with the Communication Educators Association of Ghana and the International Association of Media and Communication Research. Her social media handles are @fr3me_bella on Twitter & Belinda Osei-Mensah on LinkedIn.

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UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONAL PROXIMITY OF THE ORGANISATION-STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS OF WOOLWORTHS: A TWITTER SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS



The digital age has fundamentally changed interactions between organisations and stakeholders, making it necessary to rethink organisation-stakeholder relationships to ensure effective communication (Boyd & Crawford, 2012; Barnett, Henriques & Huated, 2019). This affects communication between organisations and their stakeholders, making social networking sites (social media) a critical first point of contact (Sklar, 2019). Digital communicative relationships are mediated and come into being through communication between the various stakeholders in an organisation-stakeholder network (Bisel, 2010; Yang & Saffer, 2019). The problem is that the organisation is a stakeholder within a network of organisations and individuals. The network perspective influences the communicative relationship dynamics between stakeholders, emphasising the importance of gaining insight into these digital organisation-stakeholder relationships and their proximity (Crawford, 2012). Relational proximity measures the distance in the relationship between two people, groups, or organisations (Ashcroft, 2016). It determines how well each can understand the intentions and performance of the other (Relational Analytics, 2013; Caux, 2014).

Ashcroft, Childs, Myers and Schuluter (2016) proposed a Relational Proximity Framework (RPF) to characterise relationships between organisations and stakeholders across several drivers. The Relational Proximity Framework (RPF) is a measure of the distance in a relationship between individuals or organisations that impacts how well each is likely to engage with the other's thinking, emotions, and behaviour (Caux, 2014; Childs, 2016). The RPF comprises three drivers used to measure the link between organisations and stakeholders: directness, continuity, and multiplexity. Thus, this paper explores three RPF drivers and how these manifest on Twitter being using a social network analysis of a South African retail organisation's engagement with its stakeholders on Twitter, exploring three drivers of the RPF. Furthermore, the RPF assesses both the strength of the relationship and its nature to identify which stakeholders need to be focused on in order to achieve organisational goals (Childs, 2016). By understanding, measuring and analysing these three key drivers, organisations can gain perspectives on their stakeholder relationships and develop more effective strategies for engagement.

Inter-organisational networks are explored using social network analysis in this study. The 'Network Overview, Discovery and Exploration for Excel Pro' (NodeXL Pro) software is used to analyse social networks to gain insight into directness, continuity, and multiplexity (as part of the RPF) that are apparent in interactions between the selected organisation and its social media followers (Knoke, 2020). An instrumental, single case study design is used to focus on Woolworths, as a top-performing brand on social media in South Africa (Ornico, 2017). The @woolworths_SA handle was used to extract tweets. The findings explain the dispersion and network structure of the case and identify the influencers mostly engaged with the organisation.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



MOKOATEDI SEBETHA

Mr Sebetha holds a BA (Media Studies) and Honours Arts (Media Studies) from University of Limpopo. He is the former news anchor or writer of Turf newspaper (Student Newspaper) and radio presenter at Radio Turf. He is currently a Masters Student in the Department of Strategic Communication, at the University of Johannesburg

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



PROF CORNE MEINTJES

Corne Meintjes is an Associate Professor of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. She has over 20 years academic experience and has developed and lectured 40 unique courses at six local and international institutions at various levels. She publishes in local and international journals on the topics of stakeholder engagement and branding and engages with the industry in numerous ways. She is passionate about enabling students to become agents of social change by co-construction of their knowledge and skills using an authentic, caring, technologically and otherwise connected and engaged learning eco-system.

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