

Navigating Digital Communication in Public Healthcare: Public Relations Practitioners' Account of Challenges and Opportunities



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ABSTRACT

Public relations practitioners in public healthcare play a crucial role in communication and relationship management, including improved access to care, patient management, and streamlined administrative processes. By leveraging digital communication effectively, the healthcare sector can enhance overall quality and efficiency, leading to better outcomes for patients and providers alike. This study explores the perceptions of Public Relations Practitioners (PRPs) regarding the use of digital communication in South Africa's public healthcare sector, with a focus on five public hospitals in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Qualitative findings from interviews conducted during the study reveal that PRPs face major challenges, including infrastructural limitations, digital illiteracy, budget constraints, and resistance to change. Despite these challenges, PRPs acknowledge that digital tools offer significant opportunities to enhance public healthcare communication. The study concludes that successful digital communication implementation requires investment in infrastructure, policy development, and capacity-building programmes. Communication technologies can offer significant benefits to the public healthcare sector in terms of transforming healthcare delivery, patient and stakeholder engagement, and administrative efficiency. Developments in technology have led Public Relations Practitioners (PRPs) to reshape their communication strategies and incorporate digital media or media-based technology in conjunction with existing public relations tools. This paper contributes to the scholarship of digital communication in healthcare by examining how public relations practitioners in South African public hospitals perceive and utilize digital communication tools. By focusing on PR practice within resource-constrained public hospitals in Durban, the research extends existing ICT-in-healthcare literature and public relations scholarship on digital dialogic communication.

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INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of public services has had a profound impact on the healthcare sector in South Africa, drawing attention to the need for more effective and adaptive communication strategies. In the Durban region of KwaZulu-Natal, public hospitals experience particular difficulties in adopting digital communication due to systemic resource limitations, infrastructural weaknesses, and financial constraints.

These challenges highlight the uneven pace of digital adoption within the South African public healthcare system and the importance of examining how communication practices are shaped within such resource-constrained environments.

Despite the potential of digital communication, the realities of implementing digital communication in public-sector healthcare are uneven. Structural constraints such as unreliable infrastructure, limited budgets, workforce digital literacy gaps, and institutional resistance to new ways of working hinder the advantages that technology can provide. These constraints are especially acute in many parts of the Global South, where public health systems face competing priorities and resource shortfalls. South Africa's public healthcare sector exemplifies this tension: growing demand for services and high expectations for accountability coexist with infrastructural and fiscal pressures that complicate digital adoption. Understanding how PRPs navigate these tensions, the pragmatic compromises they make, the strategies they adopt, and the barriers they encounter is essential for designing interventions that translate technological potential into measurable improvements in communication and care.

Recent studies on the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in healthcare have demonstrated a range of benefits, including greater patient engagement, improved operational efficiency, and more effective crisis communication.¹ Within low- and middle-income countries, however, the impact of these digital interventions is often shaped by the digital divide and broader infrastructural inequalities.² These findings underscore that while digital communication holds significant potential, its effectiveness is contingent on the broader socio-economic and institutional contexts in which it is applied. Within public relations scholarship, digital dialogic communication and the strategic use of social media have been identified as important tools for promoting institutional transparency and encouraging stakeholder participation.³ Public Relations Practitioners (PRPs) are particularly important in this regard, as they are responsible for bridging communication between hospitals and their key stakeholders, which include patients, the media, and government agencies. Research indicates that the integration of digital communication strategies in healthcare not only strengthens relationships with these groups but also reduces misinformation and enhances institutional credibility.⁴ Empirical evidence further suggests that mobile and web-based platforms improve patient-provider communication and support more informed decision-making processes, thereby enhancing the overall quality of healthcare delivery.⁵ Despite these advantages and the global momentum toward digitalization, PRPs in South African public hospitals continue to rely predominantly on traditional communication tools such as print media, notices, and in-person communication. This reliance reflects the broader systemic challenges that constrain digital adoption, including inadequate infrastructure, insufficient digital skills, and financial limitations.

Against this backdrop, this study explores how PRPs in five public hospitals in Durban perceive the role of digital communication, and the extent to which such tools enhance or hinder their ability to communicate effectively. By examining both the opportunities and challenges of digital communication, the study highlights the crucial role PRPs play in ensuring effective communication, maintaining institutional credibility, and fostering trust-based relationships with stakeholders. Furthermore, the integration of digital platforms such as social media, mobile applications, and email offers significant potential for improving accessibility, efficiency, and transparency within healthcare organizations. However, realizing these benefits requires overcoming the structural and systemic barriers that continue to hinder digital transformation in South Africa's public healthcare sector.

¹ Giuseppe Aceto, Valerio Persico, and Antonio Pescapé, "The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in Healthcare: Taxonomies, Perspectives, and Challenges," *Journal of Network and Computer Applications* 107 (April 2018): 125–54, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnca.2018.02.008>.

² Aceto, Persico, and Pescapé, "The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in Healthcare: Taxonomies, Perspectives, and Challenges."

³ Ilhem Allagui and Harris Breslow, "Social Media for Public Relations: Lessons from Four Effective Cases," *Public Relations Review* 42, no. 1 (March 2016): 20–30, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.12.001>.

⁴ Santiago Tejedor et al., "Tracking Websites' Digital Communication Strategies in Latin American Hospitals During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 23 (December 7, 2020): 9145, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17239145>.

⁵ Artin Entezarjou et al., "Experiences of Digital Communication with Automated Patient Interviews and Asynchronous Chat in Swedish Primary Care: A Qualitative Study," *BMJ Open* 10, no. 7 (July 23, 2020): e036585, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2019-036585>.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Relations in Healthcare

Public relations in healthcare institutions is essential for maintaining effective communication with stakeholders, including patients, healthcare professionals, and policymakers. PRPs are responsible for disseminating information, managing crises, and ensuring transparency in organizational communication.⁶ The role of PRPs has evolved with technological advancements, necessitating their adaptation to digital tools to improve communication effectiveness.⁷ The use of digital media strengthens organisational transparency, facilitates rapid communication, and supports a participatory culture in public healthcare.⁸ Digital tools like blogs, messaging apps, and video conferencing allow PRPs to provide consistent updates and reinforce patient trust.⁹ Scholars assert that PRPs are crucial in addressing systemic issues and enabling inclusivity through intentional communication.¹⁰ In healthcare, this translates to ensuring access, credibility, and engagement across diverse publics.¹¹

Digital Communication and Its Benefits

Digital communication offers real-time interaction, accessibility, and improved service delivery. Tools such as email, websites, mobile applications, and social media platforms enable seamless communication between healthcare providers and stakeholders. Studies indicate that integrating digital communication in healthcare improves patient engagement, reduces misinformation, and enhances institutional credibility.¹² Mobile-based applications such as Vula Mobile exemplify context-sensitive innovations improving rural outreach and decision-making.¹³ Furthermore, ICT-based communication strategies have been found to improve operational efficiency and healthcare delivery.¹⁴

Challenges in Digital Communication

Despite its advantages, the adoption of digital communication in public healthcare faces challenges such as inadequate technological infrastructure, budget constraints, and limited digital literacy among PRPs.¹⁵ Studies in South Africa highlight disparities in digital access between urban and rural hospitals, exacerbating communication inefficiencies in resource-limited settings.¹⁶ Infrastructural issues like weak internet connectivity and reliance on traditional communication methods remain barriers to transformation. Resistance to technology adoption and insufficient training further impede the effectiveness of digital communication strategies.

⁶ Marcia W. DiStaso, Michail Vafeiadis, and Chelsea Amaral, "Managing a Health Crisis on Facebook: How the Response Strategies of Apology, Sympathy, and Information Influence Public Relations," *Public Relations Review* 41, no. 2 (June 2015): 222–31, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.11.014>.

⁷ Entezarjou et al., "Experiences of Digital Communication with Automated Patient Interviews and Asynchronous Chat in Swedish Primary Care: A Qualitative Study."

⁸ Diah Febrina and Umar Halim, "New Media in Public Relations: A Study of New Media in Ragunan Zoo as a Tourism Destination," *International Journal of Media and Communication Research* 1, no. 1 (January 31, 2020): 12–21, <https://doi.org/10.25299/ijmcr.v1i1.4587>.

⁹ Jocelyn Olivia Todd Anstey Watkins et al., "Mobile Phone Use among Patients and Health Workers to Enhance Primary Healthcare: A Qualitative Study in Rural South Africa," *Social Science & Medicine* 198 (February 2018): 139–47, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.01.011>.

¹⁰ Ganga S. Dhanesh, "Putting Engagement in Its Proper Place: State of the Field, Definition and Model of Engagement in Public Relations," *Public Relations Review* 43, no. 5 (December 2017): 925–33, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.04.001>.

¹¹ Viorela Dan, Øyvind Ihlen, and Ketil Raknes, "Political Public Relations and Strategic Framing," in *Political Public Relations* (Second Edition. | New York : Routledge, 2020. | "First edition published by Routledge 2011"--T.p. verso.: Routledge, 2019), 146–64, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351053143-7>.

¹² Tejedor et al., "Tracking Websites' Digital Communication Strategies in Latin American Hospitals During the COVID-19 Pandemic."

¹³ Heather MR Ames et al., "Clients' Perceptions and Experiences of Targeted Digital Communication Accessible via Mobile Devices for Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health: A Qualitative Evidence Synthesis," *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2019, no. 10 (October 14, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD013447>.

¹⁴ Aceto, Persico, and Pescapé, "The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in Healthcare: Taxonomies, Perspectives, and Challenges."

¹⁵ Gubela Mji et al., "Exploring the Interaction of Activity Limitations with Context, Systems, Community and Personal Factors in Accessing Public Health Care Services: A Presentation of South African Case Studies," *African Journal of Primary Health Care & Family Medicine* 9, no. 1 (February 8, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4102/phcfm.v9i1.1166>.

¹⁶ Carrie Brooke-Sumner et al., "'Doing More with Less': A Qualitative Investigation of Perceptions of South African Health Service Managers on Implementation of Health Innovations," *Health Policy and Planning* 34, no. 2 (March 1, 2019): 132–40, <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czz017>.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore PRPs' experiences with digital communication in public hospitals. This qualitative study utilised semi-structured interviews to explore PRPs' perceptions of digital communication within public hospitals in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. A qualitative design employing semi-structured interviews was selected to elicit in-depth insights into PRPs' perceptions and practices regarding digital communication tools. This methodological approach is suited to exploratory research seeking to understand meanings, lived experiences, and contextual factors that shape professional practice. Purposive sampling ensured participants had sufficient practical exposure to institutional communication processes.

Data Analysis

A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore PRPs' experiences and perceptions of digital communication within public hospitals in Durban. The study utilised semi-structured telephone interviews to gather rich, in-depth data. Data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that enables the identification of patterns and meaning in data by systematically coding and developing themes. The researchers first familiarized themselves with the data by reading it repeatedly. Thereafter, initial codes were generated, and interesting patterns and meanings were labelled. Codes were collated and grouped into potential themes. Themes were reviewed and finalised. NVivo 11 software facilitated coding and theme development, allowing recurring patterns in PRPs' responses to be identified.

Data Collection

The Department of Health KZN annual report indicated that there were "72 public hospitals in KZN servicing over 28 368 964 people." Due to the large number, this research focused only on the 17 public hospitals in the Durban region. This provided a more realistic and convenient target population, however, only five hospitals agreed to participate, resulting in five study respondents. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to recruit five PRPs, each with at least two years of experience in the public healthcare sector. The selected five PRPs represented the five different hospitals that agreed to participate in the Durban metropolitan area. Interviews followed an open-ended guide and explored communication tools, barriers, and capacity needs. The open-ended questions enabled the researcher to gather detailed responses. Data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of the study's aims and objectives, and informed consent was obtained. Ethical clearance was secured from the Durban University of Technology Institutional Research Ethics Committee, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing responses, and ethical clearance was obtained from relevant authorities. Anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly maintained throughout the research process.¹⁷ Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Role of PRPs in Public Healthcare

PRPs in public hospitals are tasked with managing institutional communication, stakeholder engagement, and crisis communication. Their responsibilities include disseminating information through digital and traditional platforms to ensure transparency and maintain public trust.¹⁸ Respondents highlighted that their roles have expanded due to digital transformation, requiring them to integrate online platforms for improved stakeholder communication. PRPs in public hospitals serve multifaceted roles, including

¹⁷ Mohamed AF Ragab and Amr Arisha, "Research Methodology in Business: A Starter's Guide," *Management and Organizational Studies* 5, no. 1 (December 12, 2017): 1, <https://doi.org/10.5430/mos.v5n1p1>.

¹⁸ Prisca S. Ngondo and Anna Klyueva, "Exploratory Study of Public Relations Roles in Zimbabwe," *Public Relations Review* 46, no. 5 (December 2020): 101961, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.101961>.

stakeholder communication, image management, crisis response, and community engagement.¹⁹ Respondents highlighted their involvement in promoting institutional missions and fostering trust between hospitals and the community.²⁰ Additionally, PRPs function as mediators and strategic advisors, facilitating dialogue with patients, the government, and the media.²¹ The public relations role is to create mutually beneficial relationships, supporting organisational management to effectively communicate information and build a positive image.²² An earlier study proposed a typology of four public relations roles: “expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem-solving process facilitator and communication technician.”²³ Public relations, as a subsystem of an organisation, when effectively practiced, is integrally bound to an organisation.

A patient's satisfaction with the services provided by the hospital impacts the hospital's growth, reputation and image. Hospital speciality and services rendered, together with resourcing, are measured from a patient's perspective of satisfaction.²⁴ Public hospitals should aim to improve the health status of citizens and enhance the quality of communication to patients by introducing communication management tools.²⁵ This is supported by the view that the government uses technology to improve citizen services, including healthcare coordination with professionals sharing patient information on platforms.²⁶ Communication gaps persist in healthcare. A study shows that public hospitals allocate only a small budget for communication development, hindering public relations departments from adapting to technological changes and enhancing strategies across platforms. This challenge impacts communication quality and overall institutional success.²⁷

Adoption of Digital Communication Tools

A study on accessibility to healthcare via mobile phone use among patients and health workers shows how digital communication improves and supports healthcare delivery in low and middle-income countries.²⁸ In many countries, healthcare workers take it upon themselves to fill the gaps and develop their own digital communication methods by using their phones and their own airtime.²⁹ An example of this is the ‘Vula Mobile’ developed in 2016 by a doctor in South Africa. Vula Mobile is an initiative that allows “community health workers in rural areas to make decisions from a patient's home, for example, whether a patient with eye problems requires a referral to a hospital doctor.” Similarly, research in low- and middle-income countries explored a series of digital health tools and determined that healthcare systems benefit significantly from digital technology, particularly in terms of better-quality service delivery.³⁰ An important benefit of digital communication is that it increases not only access to healthcare but also patient

¹⁹ Jin Hong Ha and Mary Ann Ferguson, “Perception Discrepancy of Public Relations Functions and Conflict among Disciplines: South Korean Public Relations Versus Marketing Professionals,” *Journal of Public Relations Research* 27, no. 1 (January 13, 2015): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2014.924838>.

²⁰ Alison Theaker and Heather Yaxley, *The Public Relations Strategic Toolkit* (New York: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315558790>.

²¹ Amy Thurlow, Alexandre Sévigny, and Mark Dottori, “Global Capabilities in Public Relations,” *Public Relations Journal* 11, no. 3 (2018): 1–25.

²² Endang Putri Damai Hia et al., “The Use of Information and Communication Technology Through Website and Social Media as Public Relations Information Media,” in *Proceedings of the 2nd Early Childhood and Primary Childhood Education (ECPE 2020)* (Paris, France: Atlantis Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.201112.048>.

²³ Johanna Fawkes, “Public Relations and the Performance of Everything,” in *The Global Foundations of Public Relations* (Routledge, 2021), 145–61.

²⁴ Muhammad Shafiq et al., “Service Quality Assessment of Hospitals in Asian Context: An Empirical Evidence From Pakistan,” *INQUIRY: The Journal of Health Care Organization, Provision, and Financing* 54 (January 1, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0046958017714664>.

²⁵ Diogo Cunha Ferreira and Rui Cunha Marques, “Public-Private Partnerships in Health Care Services: Do They Outperform Public Hospitals Regarding Quality and Access? Evidence from Portugal,” *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences* 73 (2021): 100798.

²⁶ Aceto, Persico, and Pescapé, “The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in Healthcare: Taxonomies, Perspectives, and Challenges.”

²⁷ Guillem Marca et al., “The Value of the Evaluation of Public Relations and Communication in Organizations: The Case of the Spanish National Health System Hospitals,” *Palabra Clave* 20, no. 2 (2017): 506–28.

²⁸ Anstey Watkins et al., “Mobile Phone Use among Patients and Health Workers to Enhance Primary Healthcare: A Qualitative Study in Rural South Africa.”

²⁹ Anstey Watkins et al., “Mobile Phone Use among Patients and Health Workers to Enhance Primary Healthcare: A Qualitative Study in Rural South Africa.”

³⁰ Ames et al., “Clients' Perceptions and Experiences of Targeted Digital Communication Accessible via Mobile Devices for Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health: A Qualitative Evidence Synthesis.”

engagement, which can result in strengthening relationships between healthcare workers and patients.³¹ We live in an information age where communication through media is essential in daily engagements.³² While PRPs were familiar with various digital platforms, their day-to-day communication relied mostly on traditional tools such as email, newsletters, and telephone calls. One PR respondent mentioned using WhatsApp for internal notices, *“PRP Respondent One – I now and then communicate notices and information through whatsapp”*, but out of the five respondents, none used social media professionally. This reveals a gap between awareness and application of digital tools. All five respondents highlighted that limited access to high-speed internet and a lack of organizational support hinder the full adoption of digital tools in public hospitals.³³

Challenges and Limitations that the five PRPs highlighted in their responses:

Several key challenges were identified in the study, including:

- **Budget constraints:** Insufficient funding limits the acquisition of digital tools, training programs, and infrastructure necessary for effective communication.

“PRP Respondent One – we are held back through little finances allocated for communication purposes”

“PRP Respondent Two- it is too expensive to request for new upgraded digital communication methods like iPads and cordless phones”

“PRP Respondent Three – we sometimes use our own data to communicate to our stakeholders due to less financial support in this aspect”

“PRP Respondent Four – public relations is not budgeted for, we make do with what we are given”

“PRP Respondent five – we are a public hospital, so finances are very much needed for other emergency needs”

Budgetary shortages emerged as a pervasive constraint on PR practice across all hospitals, influencing both strategic choices and daily operations. Respondents described serious underfunding for communication functions and difficulties in procuring essential hardware and upgraded systems. Budget shortfalls also curtail training and capacity-building, forcing practitioners into ad hoc coping strategies, with many resorting to using personal mobile data to maintain stakeholder contact. Additionally, many respondents expressed dismay that public relations and communications activities are simply not ring-fenced in hospital budgets and that competing priorities further deprioritise communication funding. These financial constraints impede the adoption and sustainable use of digital tools, limit opportunities for professional development, and weaken the capacity of PR teams to deliver efficiently. It further impacts the way in which PRPs engage in reliable and proactive communication - outcomes that ultimately undermine stakeholder engagement and institutional responsiveness.

- **Limited digital literacy:** Many PRPs lack specialized training in digital communication, affecting their ability to leverage technology effectively.

“PRP Respondent One - I wish we can expand utilizing new technology as we are still using old telephone methods to communicate”

“PRP Respondent Two - it is very time-consuming to go for training as we have so much work to cover in a day”

The responses showed that many PR practitioners did not feel equipped to effectively use digital communication. Furthermore, lacking specialised training in contemporary digital tools has resulted in PR practitioners being dependent on outdated communication methods. This can impact negatively on practitioners as it can reduce their confidence and competence in embracing new digital technology. The

³¹ Agnieszka Ignatowicz et al., “Internet Videoconferencing for Patient–Clinician Consultations in Long-Term Conditions: A Review of Reviews and Applications in Line with Guidelines and Recommendations,” *DIGITAL HEALTH* 5 (January 23, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2055207619845831>.

³² Febrina and Halim, “New Media in Public Relations: A Study of New Media in Ragunan Zoo as a Tourism Destination.”

³³ M Nchabeleng, C J Botha, and C A Bisschoff, “The Uses, Benefits and Limitations of Social Media for Public Relations in South African Non-Governmental Organisations,” *Journal of Business and Retail Management Research* 12, no. 3 (2018).

findings further show that heavy workloads constrain opportunities for professional training and development. This makes it difficult to attend training even when it is available. Addressing this gap will require tailored, accessible capacity-building. This can include on-the-job coaching, modular short courses, and protected time for training to enable PR teams to fully leverage digital channels.

- **Poor internet connectivity:** Hospitals in rural areas struggle with inadequate internet access, impeding digital communication initiatives.
“PRP Respondent Three - we have poor infrastructure already, we can only hope to improve our technology when it comes to communication”
“PRP Respondent Four - I have been using the same old computer for the past 9 years. I ask for a new one every time and still I am awaiting”

Study respondents explained that inadequate internet connectivity and outdated infrastructure significantly constrain digital communication efforts. This was more so in hospitals serving rural or under-resourced areas. PR practitioners reported unreliable access to the internet, outdated computers and delayed equipment replacement, all of which hindered the use of new technology for real-time messaging or recordkeeping. These infrastructure shortfalls increase administrative burden, hinder monitoring and feedback loops, and weaken the ability of PR teams to support patient engagement and crisis responses. Addressing this barrier will require targeted investment in connectivity and hardware, streamlined procurement processes, and interim solutions to enable more consistent, effective digital engagement.

- **Resistance to change:** Some healthcare institutions demonstrate reluctance to adopt digital communication due to concerns about security, misinformation, and workload increases.
“PRP Respondent Two - I think if my job is on the line, then I will be willing to learn something new”
“PRP Respondent Three - I am old now, it’s very hard to learn new things, it will take a very long time to adjust and will make things frustrating as we are already dealing with a lot”
“PRP Respondent Five- it is too risky here to use advanced technology for digital communication because of crime and loadshedding too”

Resistance to change emerged as a significant barrier to digital adoption in the healthcare sector. PR practitioners described having limited confidence with new technologies, particularly among more senior staff, and this amplified institutional hesitancy. Additionally, study respondents reported that issues such as crime and frequent power outages intensified their reluctance to be reliant on digital communications systems. These findings suggest that mitigating this resistance will require targeted change management measures such as clear security protocols, assurances about role stability, incremental rollouts, and supportive, paced training that addresses both technical skills and staff concerns. Despite acknowledging the advantages of digital platforms, PRPs primarily relied on traditional tools such as noticeboards, telephones, and newsletters.³⁴ Barriers to digital adoption include technological unfamiliarity, inconsistent internet access, and institutional inertia.³⁵ Nevertheless, some hospitals reported limited use of tools like WhatsApp for informal communication, hinting at potential for broader digital integration.³⁶

Need for Digital Literacy and Training

PRPs are crucial for hospital marketing, promoting its image, raising awareness of social initiatives, and building its reputation. Studies affirm that the role of public relations is diverse, and marketing and

³⁴ Michael Beier and Sebastian Früh, “Technological, Organizational, and Environmental Factors Influencing Social Media Adoption by Hospitals in Switzerland: Cross-Sectional Study,” *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22, no. 3 (March 9, 2020): e16995, <https://doi.org/10.2196/16995>.

³⁵ Erich J. Sommerfeldt and Aimei Yang, “Notes on a Dialogue: Twenty Years of Digital Dialogic Communication Research in Public Relations,” *Journal of Public Relations Research* 30, no. 3 (May 4, 2018): 59–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2018.1498248>.

³⁶ Fu Lee Wang et al., “A Digital Educational Game Based on the ARCS Model for Enhancing Information Literacy,” in *2020 International Symposium on Educational Technology (ISET)* (IEEE, 2020), 122–26, <https://doi.org/10.1109/ISET49818.2020.00035>.

communications are a significant part of their role.³⁷ In this study, the PRPs' roles and responsibilities included creating a positive image of the public hospital and of the vision and mission to internal and external stakeholders. Respondents emphasised the role of PRPs in building relationships among all publics. These views support the role of public relations in providing effective, transparent and verifiable communication and in enhancing relationships between its stakeholders.³⁸ Highlighting that communication and interaction are central processes between an organization and its publics. Therefore, respondents emphasized the necessity of digital literacy programs to enhance PRPs' competencies in utilizing digital tools. Capacity-building initiatives and regular training sessions on digital communication strategies were recommended to bridge the skill gap.³⁹ Increased investment in digital resources and infrastructure can further support PRPs in fulfilling their communication roles effectively. Respondents emphasized their crucial role in timely and accurate communication. They highlighted the need for clear, concrete, and trustworthy information dissemination within the organization to stakeholders. PRPs act as mediators, managing communication between hospitals and external parties, despite facing challenges like patient and public complaints. Researchers maintain that public relations is a meaningful practice in the cultural economy, not only as a counsellor and communicator in developing relationships, but also as a mediator.⁴⁰ These views describe public relations as "opportunities for bottom-up support, co-creation of knowledge, addressing citizen concerns and enhancing collaboration as a social practice."⁴¹ Overall, the findings emphasize the urgent need for training programs to improve PRPs' digital competencies and confidence in using emerging technologies.⁴² Without institutional investment in resources and professional development, digital transformation remains uneven and limited in scope.⁴³

RECOMMENDATIONS

Digital communication holds significant potential for improving public healthcare services in South Africa. However, its implementation is hindered by infrastructural limitations, lack of training, and budgetary constraints. Addressing these challenges requires:

- **Investment in digital infrastructure:** Allocating adequate resources to improve technological capabilities in public hospitals. Reliable connectivity are foundational - without them, software or training investments cannot deliver sustained benefits.
- **Training and capacity-building initiatives:** Conducting regular workshops to enhance PRPs' digital communication skills. Skills gaps and heavy workloads reduce uptake of digital tools – therefore, training must be practical, ongoing, and tailored to staff constraints. Peer mentoring and on-the-job coaching (shadowing during real tasks) can be used to reinforce learning.
- **Strategic policy development:** Establishing guidelines for the effective integration of digital communication tools in healthcare institutions. Clear policies will reduce fear, ensure consistency, and safeguard patient data while enabling responsible innovation. Digital communications policies can be developed that focus on roles, content standards, social media usage, crisis communication protocols, data protection and patient confidentiality, moderation and misinformation handling and incident reporting procedures.
- **Continuous monitoring and evaluation:** Implementing assessment mechanisms to refine communication strategies and ensure their effectiveness. Ongoing assessment in the sector will ensure communication strategies remain responsive, cost-effective and evidence-based.

³⁷ Ha and Ferguson, "Perception Discrepancy of Public Relations Functions and Conflict among Disciplines: South Korean Public Relations Versus Marketing Professionals."

³⁸ Theaker and Yaxley, *The Public Relations Strategic Toolkit*.

³⁹ Wang et al., "A Digital Educational Game Based on the ARCS Model for Enhancing Information Literacy."

⁴⁰ Thurlow, Sévigny, and Dottori, "Global Capabilities in Public Relations."

⁴¹ Caroline E M Hodges and Nilam McGrath, "Communication for Social Transformation," in *Public Relations, Society & Culture* (Routledge, 2011), 90–104.

⁴² Marianne Grove Ditlevsen and Trine Susanne Johansen, "Communication Management under the Spotlight," *Communication & Language at Work* 6, no. 2 (September 26, 2019): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.7146/claw.v6i2.116131>.

⁴³ Bridget Tombleson and Katharina Wolf, "Rethinking the Circuit of Culture: How Participatory Culture Has Transformed Cross-Cultural Communication," *Public Relations Review* 43, no. 1 (March 2017): 14–25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.10.017>.

By addressing these challenges, public healthcare institutions can enhance communication efficiency, improve patient engagement, and foster a more responsive healthcare system. The qualitative evidence gathered from practitioners highlights a complex interplay between the power of digital media and the structural, organisational, and human constraints that shape everyday PR practice in resource-constrained healthcare settings. The findings demonstrate that while digital technology can enhance access to information, stakeholder engagement, and administrative efficiency in the healthcare sector, these benefits depend on addressing deep-seated infrastructural deficits, capability gaps, governance shortfalls, and cultural resistance.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how Public Relations Practitioners (PRPs) in South Africa's public hospitals perceive and use digital communication tools, focusing on five public hospitals in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. Public relations practitioners (PRPs) operating within healthcare settings occupy a strategic position at the intersection of organisational policy, public-facing messaging and stakeholder engagement. Decisions about which channels to use, how to frame messages, and how to manage feedback shape both everyday operations and longer-term trust in public institutions. This study revealed that PRPs face obstacles such as inadequate support, limited technology, and budget constraints. However, digital communication represents a transformative opportunity for public healthcare in South Africa, enhancing stakeholder engagement, transparency, and service delivery. Practitioners reported that digital tools can and do create opportunities such as faster dissemination of public health information, improved two-way engagement with communities, streamlined administrative routines, and enhanced institutional visibility when digital platforms are used strategically. However, uneven adoption, limited digital literacy, and infrastructural constraints hamper progress. PRPs are central to leveraging these technologies but require sustained training and institutional support to do so effectively. This study argues that digital communication is no longer optional in public healthcare; it is an essential driver of transparency, responsiveness, and institutional resilience. Public hospitals must empower PRPs through investment and training to fulfil their communication mandate in the digital age. For PR practitioners in South Africa's public hospitals, the path forward involves coordinated investments, sustained funding, targeted capacity building, clear governance, and routine evaluation. When these facets come together, digital channels can become reliable extensions of public hospitals' core mission: to inform, engage, and serve the health needs of the communities they exist to protect.

Future Research

Future studies should explore how digital communication tools impact long-term patient satisfaction and institutional trust. Comparative research between rural and urban hospitals would provide insights into infrastructural disparities and inform context-specific interventions. Evaluating scalable training models is also essential to close the digital divide in healthcare communication. Future research should investigate scalable training models and policy frameworks to close the digital divide in healthcare communication.

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