



The management of social media platforms to strategically communicate North-West University values to stakeholders

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DECLARATION

I, Stanley N Ndlovu, solemnly declare that this work is original and the result of my own labour. It has never, on any previous occasion, been presented in part or whole to any institution or board for the awarding of any degree.

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31 October 2025

SIGNATURE

DATE

DEDICATION

Dedicated

To

My Mother, Ms Rhulani Crescent Marimi (N'wa Mdluli)

Thank you so much for all the sacrifices you have made for me. I couldn't appreciate you enough with words.

You truly have demonstrated the principles of a leader and a provider; you became a light and a motivator when days were not favourable.

Manana u wa nkoka swinene

In loving Memory of my maternal grandfather, Mr John Maolemone Mdluli

His constant encouragement and motivation inspired me to pursue this degree, as he already had it, and he truly shaped my worldview. Having lost him two weeks after I embarked on this journey, I am grateful that he was a positive role model in my life.

Thank you, Mdluli, Bhekiswayo

To all candidates/researchers

Who deregistered/dropped out and are weary of this lengthy process, this dissertation is dedicated to you. Your resilience and keenness set you apart from many, and you matter. Ignite the passion and soldier on.

Matthew 6 verse 33-34

But first seek the kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.

So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today.

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Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction and faithful in prayer – Romans 12: 12.

ABSTRACT

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has redefined how digital platforms are used by individuals and businesses to engage with their stakeholders. In this instance, the study focuses on the management of social media platforms to strategically communicate North-West University (NWU) values to stakeholders. NWU's seven values can be regarded as pillars that play a significant role in informing, educating and influencing stakeholders.

This study investigated social media platforms used by the NWU to strategically communicate its values to stakeholders. At the same time, the research sought to gain an in-depth understanding of how NWU uses two selected platforms, namely Facebook and Instagram, as mediums to communicate, while also examining the institution's understanding of its stakeholders to strategically communicate its values.

To guide the study, five principles of strategic communication management were identified, namely, (1) alignment with institutional strategy, (2) stakeholder identification, (3) social media platforms as strategic channels, (4) purposive and intentional communication, and (5) engagement on social media. The data collection entailed semi-structured interviews with management and practitioners at the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department and qualitative content analysis of the NWU Facebook and Instagram pages.

The findings based on the semi-structured interviews illustrated that strategic communication is maximised when a shared understanding exists from the outset between stakeholders and the NWU. They also highlighted that NWU's distinctive approach to communication should set it apart from other institutions, that stakeholder perceptions are important in shaping the content communicated on social media platforms, and that meaningful and impactful engagement will enhance the shared view. The findings affirmed that NWU has embraced diverse stakeholders; however, there is still a need to improve the voice of prospective stakeholders in communicating the NWU values. A consistent tone is needed, but the message should adapt to the nature of each platform when communicating with stakeholders pertaining to the values. Although social media platforms are used to communicate the NWU values, the findings affirm that platforms are used for stakeholders to exchange ideas and collaborate, and that their voice must be audible when communicating their experiences that resonate with set values. These values should be lived out and be visible in how the NWU responds to questions on social media platforms. This feedback and dialogue contribute to participation and interaction on Facebook and Instagram.

The findings of the qualitative content analysis indicated that goals and strategies of the institution are important in structuring the framework of institutional communication by aligning the communication goals with the NWU's vision, mission and strategy. Diverse stakeholders are critical in representing the voices of a diverse audience, thereby strengthening communication about the NWU's values and ensuring that these are received by all stakeholders. Moreover, the NWU values are communicated consistently on social media platforms to increase their visibility and maximise their social impact. Active participation on social media platforms stimulates stakeholder interest in university affairs. It also demonstrates the institution's commitment to stakeholder collaboration and continuous social dialogue.

While the findings of this study are specific to the case of NWU and cannot be generalised to all higher education institutions, they provide meaningful insights for similar institutions aiming to enhance the strategic communication of their values via social media platforms.

Key terms: Instagram, Facebook, North-West University (NWU), social media, stakeholders, strategic communication management, values

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction and context of the North-West University's vision, mission and values

The North-West University (NWU) is a multi-campus university with a footprint across two provinces (NWU, 2024c:15): The Mahikeng and Potchefstroom Campuses are situated in the North-West Province, and the Vanderbijlpark Campus is in Gauteng. The head office, known as the Institutional Office, is in Potchefstroom, situated near the Potchefstroom Campus. The NWU was established on 1 January 2004 through the merger of two universities (the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education and the University of the North-West) with very different histories, personalities and cultures. The staff and students of the Sebokeng Campus of Vista University were also incorporated, adding to the richness of the NWU's heritage. The NWU encourages multiculturalism, multilingualism and multinationalism (NWU, 2023).

The NWU's strategy for 2024 and beyond explains the university's vision and mission (please [click here](#) for the full strategy document, available on the NWU's website). The NWU vision is its long-term goal, and its mission guides the organisation to achieve this goal. The goals and objectives are defined as specific areas of intended results that will collectively achieve the vision and mission and can be seen as the building blocks of the strategy (NWU, 2024a:7). Therefore, for this study, the terms *strategy* and *goals* are used interchangeably.

The NWU vision and mission read as follows:

Vision: To become an internationally recognised university in Africa, distinguished by engaged scholarship, social responsiveness, and an ethic of care (2014-2024) / To discover new frontiers and opportunities that benefit society, advancing our relevance and impact (2025-2035).

Mission: Its purpose is to excel in innovative learning and teaching, as well as cutting-edge research, ultimately benefiting society through knowledge (2014-2024) / To benefit society through the provision of knowledge, excelling in innovative teaching, cutting-edge research and focused engagement with the community (2025-2035).

The above vision and mission underscore the NWU values and value-driven behaviours, which have influenced the culture of the university's primary stakeholders and spread to the secondary stakeholders.

The **culture statement** is: To achieve our NWU dream, we actively build a welcoming, inclusive and enabling culture among staff and students, underpinned by behaviours congruent with commitment to social justice, diversity and an ethic of care (NWU, 2024b).

The culture statement is further summarised into three elements, namely welcoming, inclusivity, and enabling (NWU, 2024b):

- Welcoming element: A socially cohesive and culturally inclusive environment where all students and staff are welcome and comfortable.
- Inclusive element: Building an achievement-oriented environment where diversity is celebrated and diverse talents are recognised, integrated and utilised.
- Enabling element: A supportive and empowering learning experience in an environment that promotes academic excellence and offers equitable services and facilities to staff and students across all campuses.

Additionally, as an organisation that plays a significant function in society, the seven pillars of the **NWU values** are the elements that should assume the role of informing, educating and influencing stakeholders from the institution's perspective. The NWU (2025:24) defines the term, values, in its strategy as follows: *Values describe the key behavioural attributes and attitudes that the organisation would like to see manifested and embraced by staff, students and other stakeholders. Our values ensure that we can hold each other accountable.* The institution's values are important to stakeholders as they set the tone for stakeholders on what the NWU believes and what its stance is on certain issues. As explained above, the values of an institution also influence its organisational culture. According to NWU (2024b), the values and value-driven behaviour of the NWU are summarised as follows:

- *Caring and inclusive*: We consider the well-being of all our students and staff, and act in an inclusive and caring manner towards our NWU community.
- *Embracing diversity*: We build an inclusive university community that embraces differences and respects the rights and dignity of its members.
- *Transparency*: We openly conduct ourselves and our business, communicating clearly and truthfully in co-creating our NWU vision.
- *Excellence in all our endeavours*: We strive for the achievement of high-quality standards in everything we do, to meet our personal, university, community and societal expectations.
- *Ethics in all endeavours*: We display and maintain a commitment to integrity, being honest and treating all people fairly and consistently.

- *Responsibility and accountability*: We take ownership of our actions and their consequences and remain committed to solving challenges and harnessing opportunities.
- *Academic freedom and freedom of research*: We promote and protect freedom of thought and expression through teaching, learning, and research.

These values are seen as the strategic pillars of the NWU. It is important that an organisation strategically communicates its values to the stakeholders, as the values of an organisation shape how it is seen both inside the organisation and by the world outside. The NWU values play a critical role in society, and therefore, it is critical that stakeholders are familiar with the institution's values, so that they can be aligned with them. The values inform and educate the stakeholders on the institution's position in certain areas. In the long run, when these values are communicated and understood by both the organisation and its stakeholders, they become primary communicators to prospective stakeholders who might want to align with the organisation, based on its values (van Nimwegen *et al.*, 2008:65).

1.1.1 Strategically communicating values through social media

According to Sammut-Bonnici (2015:1), strategic communication management is defined as the process of planning, implementation and evaluation of communication designed to maintain or improve the organisation's competitive advantage. Strategic communication management and the flow of information are critical in establishing the organisation (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007:24). It allows the organisation to position itself to the public and prospective stakeholders in a manner that it would like to be known, by communicating what it stands for and how it wants individuals to align themselves with the organisation (Doorley & Garcia, 2015:90). The NWU's values should therefore be communicated strategically to ensure that the institution and its stakeholders speak with one voice (Sorour *et al.*, 2021:102).

Strategic communication can contribute positively and directly to the successful accomplishment of all operations as well as the vision, mission and activities of an organisation through its capacity to build public awareness and understanding of the organisation (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017:3). The strategic communication management theory provides guiding principles for how information should strategically be communicated to create consistency in engaging the NWU values with stakeholders. The NWU, as an organisation, should establish its position on the values and what it hopes to achieve through them by strategically communicating these values. However, if there is no relevant and appropriate flow of information while communicating strategic messages, it can

hinder the goals and objectives of the organisation. Therefore, it is important to understand the organisational perspective of communicating values through planned and evaluated systems.

The NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department is responsible for communicating information relating to the brand and values of the institution. This is done by utilising, amongst other media, social media platforms as communication channels in this modern era. Social media started as a medium of communicating through social networks for personal interaction (Subramanian, 2017:70). However, it has now become an organisational tool for communicating organisational information, including the organisation's values (Tsao *et al.*, 2021:175). Therefore, the NWU should communicate its values through social media by using its social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter). Organisations should communicate via platforms that are relevant to their primary stakeholders (such as students and staff in the case of the NWU), secondary stakeholders, and prospective stakeholders (such as prospective students or partners like other universities and organisations that can align with NWU values). The organisation must establish its audience by understanding its stakeholders' uniqueness and how these stakeholders will want to align themselves with the organisation on communication platforms, such as social media (Carrillo-Durán & García García, 2020:444). Strategically communicating the NWU's values via social media could, for example, attract prospective consumers of information to the institution as they see and align themselves with the values presented. According to Hoffmann and Lutz (2013:5), social media is essential in communicating values as it can reach masses of stakeholders to achieve the desired objectives set by the organisation, by being intentional and strategic in the communication designed for these social media platforms.

Social media is valuable because it not only satisfies the needs and interests of users but also supports an interactive audience for an organisation (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016:54). Social media can create engagement by incorporating the stakeholders to become active contributors to the communicated values through the designated NWU platforms. Social media platforms should be managed in a specific way that allows engagement between the organisation and stakeholders without losing the essence of communicating values (Waters *et al.*, 2009:103). It is also necessary to proactively manage social media platforms in order to interact with users and consumers of information, including the NWU values, and learn how they perceive and relate to the values. Diga and Kelleher (2009:440) argue that social media platforms have given public relations practitioners a critical role in communicating and engaging with stakeholders. The NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department plays a significant role in communicating the values to stakeholders in an effective and modern way using social media platforms. The platforms allow for the ability to convey information at a fast pace and to interact and respond with

urgency. According to Carr and Hayes (2015:47), the term 'social media' is much broader and focuses on the media vehicle used to publish or communicate content, while the term 'social network' focuses on the human side and the social structure of connections between the (registered) users of a social networking platform. Therefore, social media empowers organisations, such as the NWU, to strategically engage with stakeholders on certain aspects, such as the values of the institution.

Hernandez and Roberts (2018:11) argue that social media is a useful tool for engaging stakeholders in discussions about an organisation's values. Furthermore, social media platforms are suitable to facilitate participation and interaction amongst organisations and stakeholders. The social media platforms allow the NWU to reach out to stakeholders through sharing NWU stories and messages that are linked to the values of the institution, and to advance interaction amongst users and social media practitioners of the institution.

1.2 Problem statement

Social media platforms were identified as suitable channels to strategically communicate with stakeholders about aspects such as an organisation's values and to align these values with stakeholders (Phuong, 2023:1). When an organisation's values align with its stakeholders' beliefs and outlook on life, it could establish long-term advantages, such as ensuring that the value alignment process enables people to discern, discuss and support values that will help the organisation to make desired changes (Branson, 2008:384).

The NWU values can propel the institution and stakeholders to evolve and remain viable while communicating with those using social media platforms. The advantage of aligning values with stakeholders is that the institution and stakeholders will engage and participate, which will establish clear goals and influence stakeholders to align with NWU values. The institution manages communication while communicating its values through the messages on social media. This should be done to maintain transparent relationships with stakeholders on social media platforms. To reap the benefits described above, the NWU should use its social media platforms to embed its principles in the messages it communicates. This study posits that strategic communication management theory should serve as the foundation for conveying values through social media platforms.

Strategic communication management theory plays a role in ensuring that organisations use strategic approaches to communicate information by planning, implementing and evaluating

communication messages on platforms (Macnamara & Gregory, 2020:142). Furthermore, the organisation should be consistent and ensure that the intended messages and feedback are received by the intended stakeholders. According to Voorveld *et al.* (2018:40), social media also paves the way for organisations to communicate their messages by engaging with stakeholders on social media platforms, which in turn builds the organisation's credibility and transparency. Stakeholders are key in the communicated messages, and in the context of the NWU, those values are communicated through participation and interaction of managed content (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016:55).

The messages related to the NWU's values on social media should be planned to strategically align the NWU's values with its stakeholders. This study is necessary because organisations, such as the NWU, are increasingly adopting social media platforms to communicate. However, the institution must first have a deeper understanding of its stakeholders to communicate its values. These values should be communicated through the interaction and participation of stakeholders, and social media channels are suitable for creating this interaction and participation. Consequently, the study examines the social media platforms that the NWU employs to strategically communicate its values, with the ultimate goal of establishing a shared understanding of these values among stakeholders.

1.3 General research question

From the above problem statement, the following general research question is posed for the study: *How are social media platforms managed by the NWU to strategically communicate its values to stakeholders?*

1.4 Specific research questions

1.4.1. What principles of the strategic communication management theory are applicable to communicate the NWU values to stakeholders through its social media platforms?

1.4.2. How does the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department perceive its management of social media platforms to strategically communicate the NWU's values to stakeholders?

1.4.3. To what extent are the NWU values strategically communicated to stakeholders on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram?

1.5 Specific research aims

1.5.1. To conduct a literature study to ascertain the principles of strategic communication management theory that apply to the communication of NWU values to stakeholders through its social media platforms.

1.5.2. To determine the perception of the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department of their management of social media platforms to strategically communicate the NWU's values to stakeholders, using semi-structured interviews.

1.5.3. To investigate the extent to which the NWU values are strategically communicated to stakeholders on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, using qualitative content analysis.

1.6 Theoretical points of departure

According to Hallahan *et al.* (2007:39), strategic communication management emphasises the planned use of communication by an organisation to achieve its mission.. This theory (strategic communication management) argues that communication channels are vital to communicating specific messages with relevant stakeholders and ensuring that the feedback they receive is aligned with organisational values (Zerfass *et al.*, 2020:162).

Strategic communication management theory was used in this study to understand that social media platforms are more than just communication mediums; they require a thorough understanding of being deliberate in communicating the NWU values through a planned and intentional mode of communication to enhance unity amongst the institution and its stakeholders. The theory has the potential of drawing stakeholders into the role of not only being beneficiaries but also becoming the organisation's ambassadors in communicating the organisation's values (Cornelissen, 2020:109).

Furthermore, Di Gangi and Wasko (2016:53) argue that business models based on social media and user-generated content have shifted away from the more traditional business model, in which value is derived from the one-way delivery of products and/or services, toward the provision of

intangible value based on user engagement. This demonstrates that engaging the content, which in this case is communicating NWU values, will require the identified stakeholders to be more present in conversations and interactions on the platforms to become familiar with the values. As a result, how stakeholders interact with social media content will be determined by their assumptions about the messages intended to reach and engage people. Content on social media should thus strategically be planned and managed, especially when the institution's values are integrated into the messages.

1.7 Research approach

Research can be done by following a qualitative or quantitative research approach (Abuhamda *et al.*, 2021:76). For this study, a qualitative approach was followed by including methods that gather and interpret non-numerical data (Adams, 2015:494), namely, semi-structured interviews with management and social media practitioners at the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department and qualitative content analysis of two social media platforms (Hoover, 2021).

The qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study because it facilitated an in-depth interpretation of the participants' perceptions. Qualitative analysis provided an in-depth understanding of data on the NWU social media platforms (Tenny *et al.*, 2017:1). Furthermore, the qualitative approach is flexible when data is collected, and it illustrates in detail how participants think or respond to the communication phenomenon at hand. Qualitative researchers can use participant observation, interviews, document analysis and focus groups to gather and analyse data (Yilmaz, 2013:312). This research approach was chosen for its ability to uncover processes and patterns that help explain the complexities of human behaviour, which often do not follow a linear trajectory as seen in quantitative data. Qualitative research allows participants to express themselves freely on the issues at hand in order to better understand the phenomenon. Qualitative research findings characterise relationships, offering responses such as a partnership that is acceptable, good, or excellent; the relationship is therefore not quantified in qualitative analysis (Abuhamda *et al.*, 2021:72). The qualitative approach was relevant for this study because participants of the study were able to express their in-depth understanding of NWU values and how it is communicated via social media platforms.

1.8 Research methods

The following qualitative research methods were used to collect data for the study.

1.8.1 Literature study

A NEXUS search was conducted, and various other databases such as Google Scholar, IGI Global, Research Gate and the NWU Library were used to collect literature related to the topic of this study and to further understand the topic. The scholar searched these databases through a method of scanning and sorting research articles, academic dissertations and theses in the themes they present. Thereafter, the researcher placed the sources in appropriate categories to ensure that there was a flow of information and that the sources did not contradict the present study. The following relevant studies were highlighted:

- *The utilisation of WhatsApp by North-West University's RAG Community service in the management of relationships with internal stakeholders (Visagie, 2021)*
North-West University: Master of Arts in Communication

The study's focus was on the use of WhatsApp as an internal social media platform to communicate with internal stakeholders of NWU. The study argued that stakeholders and the institution should have a mutual understanding and trust to execute their duties to enhance the brand. Stakeholder relationships are managed by the objectives or values of the institution. The study advocates for two-way communication and a participatory approach that can establish understanding. The study conducted by Visagie (2021:3) focused only on internal stakeholders and asserts that certain strategies of NWU should be employed to manage relationships and relay messages strategically to people.

- *Using stakeholder theory to understand B2B social media usage in South Africa (Barris, 2019)*
Gordon Institute of Business Science – University of Pretoria: Master's in Administration

The study focused on understanding social media usage in business-to-business (B2B) organisations. It aimed to explore social media elements, including social media stakeholders, content, platforms and social media usage itself. The study findings indicated that social media B2B can be used to achieve marketing, human resources, and sales goals, such as brand awareness and communication. This study used social media platforms for analysis to assist in establishing the desired goals and also looked into different departments of organisations using B2B as a context (Barris, 2019:2).

- *Building and maintaining relationships with alumni through social media: A comparative study (Pressly, 2016)*

North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus: Master of Arts in Communication Studies

The study explored the significance of social media platforms for communication purposes, and how it is used to get in touch with alumni. The main objectives were to communicate, foster and maintain long-term relationships between the NWU and its stakeholders. The study employed stakeholder relationship management theory and used a mixed methods research approach (Pressly, 2016:10). The current study focused on strategic management using communication management theory and followed a qualitative approach to achieve the general research question.

- *The use of Facebook as a communication tool between universities and students (Bollapragada, 2016)*

University of KwaZulu-Natal – Master of Business Administration

The study showed that institutions of higher education understand the role that social media platforms play in conveying information to relevant stakeholders, and this has ensured that these institutions use social media platforms to communicate. The study focused on investigating the effectiveness of Facebook as a communication tool (Bollapragada, 2016:1). The mentioned study and the present study both used content analysis of social media platforms like Facebook and employed the strategies used to communicate with stakeholders as theoretical departure points.

- *A strategic communication approach to managing stakeholder relationships according to the King Report on Governance (Meintjes, 2012)*

University of Pretoria: Doctoral Study

The researcher considered how communication professionals can assist their companies in managing stakeholder relationships according to the King Report on Governance. Strategic stakeholder relationship management requires strategic communication within the organisation as a communication framework to identify, prioritise, communicate and build relationships with stakeholders. The study found that strategic stakeholder relationship management is enhanced through the empowerment of the communication management function. The empowerment of primary and secondary stakeholders is crucial because it puts them in a better position to transmit values rather than being passive consumers of information. (Meintjes, 2012:64).

The studies mentioned above imply that there is sufficient literature available on strategic communication management and how it is used to communicate via social media platforms to support the present study. Even though all the above-mentioned studies focused on similar theories and literature, they all have different contexts and do not focus on communicating the values of a higher education institution, such as the NWU. The current study is unique, as no previous study has focused on how the NWU strategically communicates its values to stakeholders by engaging on social media platforms. The NWU needs to communicate its values to stakeholders via social media platforms, as these values foster trust, define institutional identity, and build enduring relationships—key elements for sustaining its reputation and long-term success.

1.8.2 Semi-structured interviews with the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department

The study focused on the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department and purposefully selected members of management and social media practitioners at this department to participate in semi-structured interviews. These participants were purposively selected as part of the known-group sampling method (du Plooy & Du Plooy, 2009:114), as they were knowledgeable about communicating the NWU values and engaging with stakeholders strategically using the university's social media platforms.

The researcher sent e-mails to invite the participants and scheduled interviews based on their availability. The interviews were scheduled to take place either in their offices or via MS Teams for those who were not able to meet face-to-face. The interviews were guided by an interview schedule, developed based on the principles identified in the literature study (see Chapter 2). The interviews were recorded with the permission of participants and lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcriptions were deductively analysed using qualitative content analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009:3), according to the same theoretical principles used to develop the interview schedule, as identified in the literature (see Chapter 2). The goal of this analysis was to answer specific research question 2 (see section 1.4.2) and was used to reach conclusions based on the authentic findings (Braun & Clarke, 2012:59). Please see Chapter 3 for a detailed description of the semi-structured interviews employed in the study.

1.8.3 Qualitative content analysis of the NWU social media platforms

Content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique. The NWU's Facebook and Instagram pages have been identified as the primary social media mediums used by the NWU to communicate with its stakeholders, due to the wealth of information they contain, the content that is relevant to the study, and the fact that these platforms allow for stakeholder interaction.

The selected posts analysed on the above-mentioned platforms spanned the period from January 2024 to June 2024 (the first six months of the year) because the NWU celebrated its 20th anniversary after the merger of several universities to form the unified NWU, as explained in section 1.1. This 20-year celebration was themed "greatness" to portray the values that drive the university now and in the future. The launch of the 20-year celebration of greatness and excellence started running in 2024 on social media platforms, and all posts in the first six months of 2024 were included in the content analysis. The comments and engagement within this timeframe on the two social media platforms also formed part of the qualitative content analysis. The qualitative analysis of these posts was to establish how the NWU values are strategically incorporated into the communicated messages with stakeholders on Facebook and Instagram and how the NWU engages with stakeholders about the values via these platforms. The social media platforms were analysed using the same criteria found in the literature that were utilised to analyse the data received from the semi-structured interviews (see Chapter 2). This enabled the researcher to gather the information needed to answer specific research question 3 (see section 1.4.3). Please see Chapter 3 for a detailed explanation of the qualitative content analysis of the NWU's social media platforms.

1.9 Ethical considerations

According to Dawson *et al.* (2020:4), respect for autonomy justifies several fundamental practices within research. This means that for everything that is done in the research process, the researcher must be able to relate to the participants through mutual understanding and respect. The researcher has an important task that comes with considerable responsibility and is governed by and aligned with research ethics set by the Basic and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) of NWU. A researcher's ethical conduct must prioritise human protection by conducting research in a friendly and safe environment for both the participant and the researcher. The study ensured that no harm or danger was imposed on the participants and that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequences. The researcher understood the importance of integrity and equality in performing the study and strived to ethically

pursue source information. The researcher fully disclosed to the participants the reason for the research and how they would be protected. Voluntary informed consent was obtained before any empirical research was conducted. This demonstrates that the researcher acknowledged the need for accountability when conducting the study. This was to protect both parties and ensure that the research was conducted honourably. The issue of confidentiality remained a top priority and was treated with discretion to prevent the participants from being victimised. The participants were not identifiable in the reporting of the data by assigning pseudonyms to each participant, for example, Participant A, Participant B, etc. The content analysed on the NWU's Facebook and Instagram pages is available in the public domain and is available to anyone.

The researcher submitted the proposal and ethical application to BaSSREC to ensure that they satisfied the university's criteria and followed ethical research procedures. Ethical approval was granted (ethics number NWU-01000-24-A7). Permission from the NWU Gatekeeper Committee was obtained for interviewing the personnel at the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department. The collected data, transcriptions, and coding files were kept in an encrypted file on the student's laptop for five years. Access was limited to the supervisor and the student for the duration of the study.

1.10 Limitations and significance of the study

The researcher acknowledges that the qualitative nature of this study and the use of one institution as a case restrict the generalisability of the study. However, the purpose of this study was not to generalise the findings but rather to gain an in-depth understanding of the strategic management of social media platforms to communicate the NWU values to its stakeholders.

The study offers practical recommendations to strengthen the communication of NWU's values through social media, fostering greater alignment between those values and stakeholder engagement within both the university and the broader community. The study has demonstrated how engagement on social media about the NWU's values can contribute to positioning the institution in a digital era and enhance stakeholder engagement on these platforms. This also benefits the academic community as the NWU's case adds knowledge and understanding of the role of social media platforms in not only communicating the products but also the values of a higher education institution, such as the NWU. The findings of this study could be further explored in other organisations to improve strategic communication management of an organisation's values on social media platforms.

1.11 Chapter layout

Chapter 1: Introduction and background to the study

In the first chapter, a short overview of the context of the study is provided, the problem statement is discussed, and the research questions guiding the study are posed.

Chapter 2: Strategic communication management of social media

Within this chapter, the principles of strategic communication management theory that are relevant for communication on social media platforms are explored to provide a theoretical framework that will guide the rest of the study. This chapter also answers specific research question 1.

Chapter 3: Research methods

The qualitative research approach is explained and motivated in this chapter. The use of semi-structured interviews to collect data from the participants at the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department, and the qualitative content analysis to analyse the NWU's social media pages are explained.

Chapter 4: Findings obtained through the semi-structured interviews

Chapter 4 discusses the findings based on the perceptions obtained from the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department through the semi-structured interviews based on the identified principles set out in Chapter 2. The aim of Chapter 4 is to answer specific research question 2.

Chapter 5: Findings obtained through the qualitative content analysis of social media platforms

Chapter 5 provides the findings based on the qualitative content analysis of the NWU's social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram pages), also based on the theoretical principles identified in Chapter 2. Chapter 5 aims to answer specific research question 3.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

The purpose of this chapter is to answer the general research question, focusing on how social media platforms are managed by the NWU to strategically communicate its values to stakeholders. After the general research question is answered, certain recommendations are

made for the NWU to improve its strategic communication about its values on social media. Lastly, this chapter acknowledges the limitations of the study and provides avenues for future studies.

1.12 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the study by providing a brief overview of the context of study (the NWU's values and its social media platforms), outlining the problem statement, research questions and aims. The chapter also provided an overview of the research approach and methods. The next chapter will review the relevant literature to identify the theoretical principles guiding the research.

CHAPTER 2 STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter aimed to identify the problem statement and research questions to guide the rest of the study. It was argued that values are part of the NWU's core existence, based on the university's vision, mission and culture statement, and guide the university's core priorities. Therefore, the values must be strategically communicated for stakeholders to clearly understand them in order to better identify with the institution and see its distinct role in society.

Organisations employ a variety of methods to connect with stakeholders, ranging from traditional media to social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram (Ștefănică, 2014:499). These social media platforms enable organisations to share information and communicate values in ways that facilitate reception and understanding among stakeholders. The rapid expansion of new media, such as social media, provides institutions (such as the NWU) with communication channels to engage with strategic stakeholders (Hinson, 2012:15; Wright & Hinson, 2009:18). Social media platforms have thus become channels for institutions to employ in their communication strategies. According to Chaffey (2024), 62.3% of the world's population uses social media, with the average person spending approximately 2 hours and 23 minutes per day on these platforms. This global uptake illustrates the growing importance of social media as a space for people and institutions to engage and participate in dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 2021:2). Social media has been shown to influence levels of engagement (Aydin *et al.*, 2021:773), underscoring the need for institutions like the NWU to manage these platforms strategically when communicating their core values.

With this background in mind, Chapter 2 provides a discussion of the strategic communication management theory to identify principles that will guide the study. This chapter aims to answer specific research question 1: *What principles of the strategic communication management theory are applicable to communicate the NWU values to stakeholders through its social media platforms?*

2.2 Strategic communication management theory

The word *strategic* originated from the Greek word *strategos*, which means *generalship* when translated to English (Akduman, 2025:6; Strachan, 2008:431). The term is thus a military concept associated with warfare and describes how an army should be managed to reach its goals (Akduman, 2025:9).

In a communication context, Grunig and Repper (1992:118) state that communication that is practised strategically makes organisations more effective by developing relationships with stakeholders. Steyn (2003:179) further mentions that strategic communication “provides focus and direction for an organisation’s communication,” and Plowman (2005:132) states that strategic communication “begins when communication practitioners can identify potential problems in relationships with the organisation’s stakeholders.”

A definition of strategic communication can also be found in the first issue of *The International Journal of Strategic Communication* (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007:7): “The purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission [...]” It further implies that people will be engaged in deliberate communication practices on behalf of organisations, causes, and social movements. Kristensen (2010:137) defines strategic communication as “not only a set of supporting communication tactics, but as strategically intended, planned, and purposeful mechanisms aimed at changing the attitudes or actions of specific target groups and with a potential value and mandate in relation to the communicating organisation as such and in relation to its surroundings.” Falkheimer and Heide (2014:132) define strategic communication as an organisation’s conscious communication efforts to reach its goals. All of these viewpoints focus on planned communication with strategic stakeholders. The definitions outline that organisations communicate for a certain purpose to fulfil their aims and objectives. The emphasis on strategic communication is that for it to achieve its mandate, there must be proper management of communication messages and proper channels (Cornish *et al.*, 2011:18).

Strategic communication is purposeful in nature, as it focuses on how the organisation promotes and presents itself through the intentional activities of its management and communication practitioners (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007:7). Andersson (2025:2) and Argenti (1998:200) mention that strategic communication management consists of three aspects, namely, the organisation, the audience who receives the messages and reacts to it, and the communication process which takes place through the messages. Argenti (1998:201-202) further explains that focusing on these aspects will lead to reaching the organisation’s goals. The messages that the audience receives must be suited to each stakeholder group and must also be communicated at the right time. These aspects interact with one another, and how they relate to one another will determine the

effectiveness of the message. Also important is that these aspects are linearly related, implying that it is a continual process, emphasising the purposeful nature of strategic communication.

Furthermore, Van Ruler (2020:372) argues that strategic communication is not merely for communicating the organisation's vision, mission and goals; it plays a pivotal role in shaping strategy and communicating organisational values. The strategies should assist in crafting messages related to these values and engaging content that can assist in communicating with stakeholders through the use of social media as a platform (Troise & Camilleri, 2021:168). These strategies should be managed effectively and purposively to reach the organisational goals.

Overall, strategic communication management theory explains how organisations plan, execute and evaluate communication to achieve their overall strategic objectives (Macnamara & Gregory, 2020:142). In the university setting, it helps to clarify why and how values should be communicated intentionally, not just incidentally. Strategic communication management theory views communication as a deliberate, planned and integrated process, aligned with an organisation's mission, vision, goals, and values (Van Ruler, 2020:374). Sending messages is only one aspect of communication; another is influencing perceptions to support the values of the institution (Djordjevic & Cotton, 2011:388). Applied to this study, the NWU's communication strategies should be managed to communicate the values of the NWU to stakeholders through various channels, including social media platforms.

The following principles were identified from the literature to strategically manage and communicate the NWU's values on social media platforms. The researcher acknowledges that these principles do not include all the principles of strategic communication management theory, but were selected as those relevant to the context of the specific study.

2.2.1 Alignment with institutional strategy

According to Bütschi and Steyn (2006:108), strategic communication management theory contributes directly to organisational effectiveness by ensuring that communication is integrated into, and supportive of, the overall enterprise strategy. This theoretical perspective positions communication not as an isolated operational function. It is a strategic management activity that enables the organisation to achieve its long-term objectives. In the context of value communication, the theory emphasises the necessity for an organisation to first comprehend and clearly express its own values, then establish a connection with stakeholders, and ultimately align its communication practices with both its internal values and stakeholder expectations. In this

regard, social media platforms offer vital mechanisms through which institutional values can be conveyed, reinforced and enacted. By strategically managing these platforms, institutions such as the NWU can ensure that their messages are consistent with the institution's vision, mission and strategic goals, thereby enhancing organisational legitimacy and trust among stakeholders.

Popescu (2017:43) emphasises that strategic communication involves deliberate and planned activities undertaken by those responsible for shaping the organisation's presence and image within society. This responsibility includes communicating on behalf of the organisation, its causes, and any social movements it supports. For the NWU, this role falls to its social media practitioners, who are tasked with ensuring that all online content aligns with the university's strategic intent. Their responsibility extends beyond mere content transmission; it includes fostering stakeholder understanding of NWU's values and cultivating a sense of shared identity. Mambadja *et al.* (2015:60) further argue that effective corporate communication strategies must be anchored in efficient and appropriate channels. Social networking sites, when managed strategically, allow for targeted, interactive, and timely engagement with stakeholders, thereby amplifying the reach and resonance of institutional values (Tawil *et al.*, 2024:194,198). Alignment with institutional strategy in this context means that the choice of platforms, the style of messaging, and the nature of engagement are all informed by the organisation's overarching strategic objectives (see section 2.2.1 and section 2.2.3 below).

The principle of alignment ensures that social media communication does not occur in isolation but rather serves as a deliberate extension of institutional priorities. When social media content reflects the organisation's strategic direction, stakeholders receive consistent and coherent messages that strengthen institutional reputation and foster trust. For the NWU, this involves aligning its social media management practices with its strategic plan, which includes prioritising its values to maximise the impact of its communication efforts.

2.2.2 Stakeholder identification

Effective strategic communication begins with the accurate identification of stakeholders, as this ensures that messages are relevant, targeted and aligned with the needs and expectations of the intended audience (Bourne, 2016:436). According to Kent and Li (2020:6), social media communication should serve the interests of all stakeholders and not merely the organisation's own agenda. In the context of the NWU, this means using its values not only as internal guiding principles but also as public-facing commitments that reflect what the institution stands for in society and how it expects stakeholders to engage both internally and externally.

Social media platforms are particularly effective in connecting organisations with diverse stakeholder groups and providing channels through which institutional values can be strategically communicated (Yang *et al.*, 2020:19). For the NWU, the primary stakeholders are likely to include current students and alumni (external stakeholders), and academic and administrative staff (internal stakeholders). Secondary stakeholders may comprise institutional partners, funders, government bodies and the broader public. Each group interacts with the institution differently, possesses distinct interests and has unique expectations regarding the information they receive and the manner in which it is presented. Stakeholder identification, therefore, plays an important role in ensuring that content on social media is tailored to the right audiences (Niftiyev & Aziz, 2024:36). Messaging intended for prospective students, for example, might focus on the NWU's values as they relate to excellence in its endeavours to embrace diversity. By clearly signalling on social media who the intended audience is, the NWU can improve message relevance.

Effective and strategic communication management also requires understanding stakeholders' needs and preferences (Bourne, 2016:436). Organisations should get a clear picture of who their stakeholders are, what should be communicated, how to answer questions and identify gaps in the market (Grunig, 2006:61). Austin and Pinkleton (2006:4) and Steyn and Puth (2000:145) explain that communication practitioners should collect accurate information from stakeholders to act strategically to solve issues daily and communicate effectively. According to Radford and Goldstein (2002:252), communication practitioners not only have the responsibility to spread information to the organisation's stakeholders, but also to gather information to effectively communicate with these stakeholders. This involves considering informational needs, such as what stakeholders want or need to know (see section 2.2.2), and relational needs, such as how they wish to be engaged and involved (Herremans *et al.*, 2016:420) (see section 2.2.5). For example, alumni may prefer storytelling that showcases shared experiences and institutional achievements, while current students may value posts that demonstrate that the university is caring and inclusive. Aligning content with an understanding of the stakeholders could help to ensure that the NWU's social media communication resonates meaningfully with each stakeholder group. The identification of stakeholders is a strategic process that could ensure that the NWU's values are communicated in an audience-appropriate and strategically aligned manner.

2.2.3 Social media platforms as strategic channels

Social media has emerged as a critical communication channel for organisations, providing dynamic and interactive platforms through which institutional messages can be strategically

communicated to stakeholders. Szwajca (2017:163) observes that social media, as a communication tool, plays an important role in enabling stakeholders to access information with ease. Selecting the appropriate medium for stakeholders is, therefore, a strategic decision. In the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, adapting communication strategies to digital platforms such as Facebook and Instagram has become essential for organisations, including the NWU. This shift reflects a broader adoption of digital-era communication practices, where immediacy, accessibility and interactivity are defining characteristics (Aula, 2010:43).

Organisations are increasingly recognising the strategic value of social media, as these platforms provide abundant opportunities for relationship-building, open dialogue and the exchange of information (Van Den Berg & Struwig, 2016:532). They facilitate two-way engagement, enabling stakeholders to respond to and expand upon organisational messages (Winstone *et al.*, 2021:6) (see section 2.2.4). While social media often serves entertainment purposes, it is also a space where stakeholders discuss brand-related experiences, share preferences, and influence broader perceptions of the organisation.

From a communication strategy perspective, social media channels are characterised by low barriers to entry, open participation, the potential for community-building, and the rapid transmission of information across interconnected networks (Aula, 2010:44). These features support strategic aims such as enhancing brand visibility, strengthening organisational reputation, fostering knowledge sharing, improving customer acquisition and retention, and enabling low-cost promotional activities (Chikandiwa, 2013:30). When content is crafted strategically, these platforms can reinforce organisational values, prompting stakeholders to identify more closely with the institution. For the NWU, such alignment can be achieved through carefully curated messaging on these social media platforms that reflects its values as a strategic priority (see section 2.2.1).

Chung *et al.* (2010:1) highlight that social media platforms enable organisations to refine their communication programmes, while also offering stakeholders the opportunity to share their own narratives in response. This aligns with Szwajca's (2017:164) argument that the contemporary communication environment demands more than the simple transmission of messages. It requires listening, meaningful engagement, and personalisation (Szwajca, 2017:164). Waters *et al.* (2009:102) highlight that content on social media must be managed strategically to encourage interaction between the organisation and its stakeholders. This requires understanding the features and audience dynamics of each platform and then tailoring content accordingly to ensure relevance.

The effective use of social media requires understanding the unique capabilities and features of different platforms. Facebook, for example, is optimised for longer-form content, detailed event promotion, community group engagement, and targeted advertising, making it well-suited to in-depth discussions of institutional values and initiatives (Tesfaye, 2024:19). Instagram, by contrast, is highly visual and driven by imagery, short videos, and ephemeral content such as stories, which can be used to convey values in a visually compelling and emotionally resonant manner (Tesfaye, 2024:19). While both platforms can be used to communicate the NWU's values, the tone, format and style of communication must be adapted to suit the strengths and audience expectations of each. A post that resonates on Facebook through a detailed narrative and stakeholder discussion might, on Instagram, be more effective as a striking visual with concise, value-centred messaging. Using social media platforms as communication channels sets clear expectations for stakeholders about where and how they can engage with the organisation. The choice and management of these channels play a critical role in reinforcing organisational objectives, in this case, the communication of the NWU's values. The effective management of these channels can help to provide insights into stakeholders' preferences and allow for more tailored engagement strategies (Bourne, 2016:436).

Social media as communication channels should be used as deliberate and strategic instruments for growth (Jamil *et al.*, 2022:2). When managed effectively, these channels can enhance engagement, generate feedback on communicated values and build mutual understanding between the institution and its stakeholders (Chukwurah *et al.*, 2024:60). In the digital era, the growing effectiveness of online advertising and targeted messaging offers further opportunities to strengthen the communication of institutional values (Ahmed *et al.*, 2019:14). For the NWU, this underscores the importance of recognising social media not simply as a conduit for information, but as a channel that can foster alignment between the NWU values and stakeholders' commitment towards the values.

2.2.4 Purposive and intentional communication

Purposive and intentional communication refers to the deliberate crafting and transmission of messages that are transparent, goal-oriented and ultimately aligned with the organisational values. Pfeiffer (1998:423) emphasises that purposeful communication requires clarity of objectives and transparency regarding the content and intent of messages. In the context of the NWU, this means articulating its values clearly to stakeholders and explaining why these values exist, how they align with the institution's vision and mission and why they matter to the stakeholders. Appel *et al.* (2020:85) note that messages communicated via social media shape

stakeholders' perceptions and influence the narratives they consume. When messaging is purposeful, it reinforces brand values, communicates organisational priorities and fosters stakeholder identification with the institution. Leo (2019) argues that purposeful communication drives brand storytelling, making it more likely that stakeholders will engage with and share content that reflects a meaningful cause or value proposition. In this regard, the NWU's communication of its values should go beyond simply stating them. It should connect them to the lived experiences and aspirations of its stakeholders.

Purposive communication entails not only transmitting information but also requires an awareness of the reason behind each message and the outcomes it seeks to achieve (Leo, 2019). Hoffmann and Lutz (2013:32) add that values communicated on social media shape the worldviews of those engaged with the institution, meaning that the content has the potential to influence stakeholder perceptions over time. Eagar (2018) contends that communicating with purpose is about ensuring that messages remain authentic, relevant and clear. For social media practitioners, this entails ensuring that each message is unambiguous, contextualised and supported with explanations that enable stakeholders to understand the values being communicated.

The strategic purpose of communication also encompasses informing, reassuring and educating audiences (Jeffery, 2009:20). For the NWU, this means that each post relating to its values should be designed to inform stakeholders accurately, reinforce shared beliefs and enhance mutual understanding. In doing so, messages on social media must be grounded in an understanding of the stakeholders' existing perspectives, the institution's communication objectives and the intended outcomes of each interaction. Purposive and intentional communication on social media requires the NWU to ensure that every piece of content on its Facebook and Instagram pages contributes to a coherent narrative that communicates the institution's values effectively.

2.2.5 Engagement on social media

Engagement is an important principle in understanding how organisations strategically communicate with stakeholders through social media platforms. Within the strategic communication management literature, engagement is "an orientation that influences interactions and the approach that guides the process of interactions among groups" (Taylor & Kent, 2014:384). For the NWU, this principle is critical in assessing how Facebook and Instagram are managed to communicate institutional values in a way that creates participation from stakeholders.

Social media has altered the way organisations interact with their stakeholders, encouraging the creation of institutional profiles and enabling ongoing dialogue (Waters *et al.*, 2009:102; Wright & Burson, 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2009:15). These platforms allow for participation and discussions (Macnamara & Zeffass, 2012:294), thereby providing opportunities for the NWU to connect meaningfully with internal and external stakeholders in promoting its values. Participation on social media platforms is an essential component of engagement. Platforms such as Facebook institutionalise participation through features such as the “like” button, but these interactions do not necessarily indicate understanding or acceptance of institutional values (Kent & Li, 2020:3). Effective engagement requires deeper forms of interaction that enable stakeholders to respond and contribute to dialogue about the values being communicated. Two-way communication is fundamental for meaningful engagement. Liu and Shrum (2002:55) note that interactivity must be reciprocal. The organisation and stakeholders should actively contribute to the exchange of ideas. Jo and Kim (2003:206) similarly emphasise that interactivity is essential for building and maintaining relationships with stakeholders. Social media also enables instantaneous interaction, allowing stakeholders to ask questions, share feedback and collaborate on the institutional content and messages (Aydin, 2020:1). This type of collaborative interaction could enhance mutual understanding and provide valuable insights for refining future communication strategies (Lewis, 2006:197).

It should be noted that engagement goes beyond isolated interactions (Pentina *et al.*, 2013:70). It is rooted in sustained dialogue. Strategic communication management theory emphasises the need for open, transparent and purposeful conversations (see section 2.2.4) that align stakeholders and institutional values (Vernuccio, 2014:216). This alignment is particularly relevant to the NWU, whose values serve as a basis for community-building among its diverse stakeholders. For engagement to be meaningful, the content shared must be relevant and strategically aligned with organisational objectives (see section 2.2.3). Wai Lai and Liu (2020:4) note that content credibility influences acceptance and distribution on social media platforms. In the NWU context, this means that posts containing the university’s values should convey accurate information that appeals to the interests and needs of the stakeholders (see section 2.2.5). Kietzmann *et al.* (2011:245) describe engagement as the extent to which users share, exchange and distribute content. Informative content is particularly important for attracting engagement, as posts with higher informational value tend to receive more user interaction and shares (De Vries *et al.*, 2012:85; Shahbaznezhad *et al.*, 2021:49). Therefore, content should be strategically and purposefully created to increase the likelihood of dialogue, participation and shares, which will ultimately reinforce the institutional values on social media platforms.

Engagement on social media is measured by shares, as explained above, and also through likes, comments and clicks (Lee *et al.*, 2018:5107; Moran *et al.*, 2020:533). These indicators could help assess the alignment between stakeholders' perceptions and institutional values. Furthermore, the ability to observe user behaviour gives organisations opportunities to refine their communication (Srivastava *et al.*, 2018:1832). For the NWU, monitoring of Facebook and Instagram activity can reveal which posts stimulate the most interactions and which types of content, such as photos, infographics, videos, etc., are most effective.

By applying the above principles, the NWU should use Facebook and Instagram as platforms for engagement, rather than just broadcasting. These platforms enable the university to integrate its values into content that invites dialogue, participation and co-creation of meaning with stakeholders. Posts may be designed to encourage interaction, such as through questions and calls to comment, or the use of interactive elements like hashtags (Pletikosa Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013:845; Schultz, 2017:23). Furthermore, the NWU can gather feedback and assess whether the communicated values are understood and accepted through interaction. Consistent and deliberate engagement could assist in reinforcing the NWU's values on social media. Overall, engagement is an important principle in the strategic communication of institutional values on social media. In conclusion, strategic and effective engagement on Facebook and Instagram requires participation and dialogue, and effective management of stakeholders' responses.

2.3 Conclusion

The literature highlights that effective strategic communication management requires deliberate alignment between institutional goals (which relate to the vision and mission that guide these goals) and communication activities. As Grunig and Dozier (2003:315) note, communication practitioners must balance organisational interests with those of stakeholders. In the context of this study, such alignment ensures that the values communicated via social media are consistent with institutional objectives, reinforcing the university's overarching mission and vision.

Central to this process is the identification of primary and secondary stakeholders. In the context of this study, the following stakeholders would probably form part of the identification: students, staff, alumni, partners, funders, the government, and the public. The NWU should have a clear understanding of stakeholders' needs and expectations. Stakeholder identification and analysis are therefore essential for tailoring messages and content on social media platforms that resonate with each stakeholder group, ensuring inclusivity and relevance. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Instagram, have become strategic channels for institutional

communication. Curtis *et al.* (2010:90) highlight their capacity for interaction and the broad distribution of information, while Liu and Shrum (2002:55) emphasise their ability to facilitate feedback. These capabilities enable the NWU to communicate its values, ensuring that stakeholder feedback informs message refinement. For this to occur, *purposive and intentional* communication is critical. Messages must be transparent, goal-oriented and rooted in the institution's strategic priorities to sustain credibility.

Engagement on social media emerges as a goal. Drawing on Kent and Taylor's (2021:4) principles, these platforms should be positioned as interactive spaces for discussion and collaboration. Winstone *et al.* (2021:8) highlight that social media fosters social connection and facilitates the exchange of information through engagement. For NWU, this means that Facebook and Instagram should be managed as components of its strategic communication avenues where the university's values are conveyed and also discussed through active participation, dialogue, feedback and interaction. Engagement metrics such as likes, shares, comments and click-throughs are evidence of reach.

In conclusion, the literature provides principles of strategic communication management for the NWU's approach to social media: (1) The alignment of communication on social media with institutional strategy ensures that values are communicated strategically, (2) stakeholder identification enables targeted and relevant communication, (3) social media platforms provide channels to communicate relevant content, (4) purposive and intentional communication transmits the values transparently, (5) and engagement creates dialogue and participation with stakeholders. By integrating these principles, the NWU can strategically communicate its values in ways that enhance the institution's reputation and credibly position the institution in the digital space.

To answer specific research question 1, Table 2.1 on the next page provides a summary of the applicable principles of strategic communication management theory to communicate the NWU values to stakeholders through its social media platforms.

Table 2.1: Theoretical guidelines for the study

Strategic communication management on social media	
Guiding principles	Operational definition for the context of this study
Alignment with institutional strategy	Alignment with institutional strategy refers to the strategic communication of the NWU's values on social media platforms in a manner that supports the institution's vision and mission and contributes to the realisation of its strategies. This entails consistently embedding the NWU's values within the core messages shared with stakeholders, ensuring that these values are clearly present, portrayed and reinforced in social media communication.
Stakeholder identification	Stakeholder identification refers to identifying the NWU's stakeholders who are communicated with on social media platforms and tailoring messages according to their specific needs. The communication of values on social media platforms should be inclusive, ensuring that messages resonate with and represent the diversity of the NWU's stakeholder base. Furthermore, the NWU should recognise and understand the diverse groups that engage with and relate to its values on social media platforms. This involves analysing stakeholders' perspectives, as reflected in their engagement and feedback on social media, to gain insight into how they interpret and apply these values.

Social media platforms as strategic channels	Social media platforms as strategic channels of communication refer to the deliberate selection and effective management of designated platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, to communicate the NWU's values. These platforms serve as essential media for crafting and sharing content where the NWU's values are clearly identifiable, enabling targeted and meaningful engagement with stakeholders. Strategic use of these channels enhances interaction and ensures that the communication of values is optimised through the deliberate and effective selection of the correct social media channel for each message.
Purposive and intentional communication	Purposive and intentional communication refers to the consistent, deliberate and strategic use of social media platforms to convey the NWU's values in a manner that fully represents what the institution stands for. This entails creating and sharing content that purposefully and transparently integrates the NWU's values, ensuring that it aligns with the institution's vision and mission. Such communication is designed to reinforce the values on social media platforms.
Engagement on social media	Engagement on social media refers to the creation and management of interactive content that fosters dialogue between the NWU and its stakeholders, with the NWU's values serving as the foundation for these interactions. This involves creating posts that encourage participation, inviting feedback and promoting conversation about the values. Strategic engagement ensures that interactions are more than "likes" on social media, but include comments, shares, interaction and co-creation of content that reflect the NWU's values in the public domain.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the importance of the strategic communication management theory on social media platforms. The relevant guiding principles were identified to guide the rest of the study. The literature review highlighted the relevance of promoting the NWU's values to stakeholders through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. The NWU should strategically structure the messages on social media platforms that enhance the values.

This chapter aims to give direction on how the study outcomes are achieved through the chosen data-collection methods. This interpretivist study adopted a qualitative research approach, which aims to understand and describe perceptions, opinions and behaviours within a social context (du Plooy & Du Plooy, 2009:212; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022:421). The qualitative approach incorporates semi-structured interviews, which were used to understand the perceptions of the participants in the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department. Secondly, qualitative content analysis was employed to analyse the NWU's social media pages, namely Facebook and Instagram.

3.2 A qualitative research approach

Qualitative research focuses on feelings, ideas or experiences and collects non-numerical data to generate insights (Ugwu & Eze, 2023:20). Ames *et al.* (2019:2) elaborate that qualitative research mainly looks at examining people's experiences of the world around them by producing data based on studies across a range of settings. Qualitative research is designed to allow scholars to access information to contribute new knowledge about the sacred dimension of people's lived experiences (Grossoehme, 2014:118) and to identify the patterns that arise through analysis (Saldana, 2011:48). This research approach allowed the researcher to gather insights from experts in the different sectors, thereby deepening understanding of how social media platforms are managed to strategically communicate NWU's values to institutional stakeholders. By capturing stakeholders' perspectives on how NWU's values are communicated through Facebook and Instagram, the knowledge generated holds significance for both the institution and its stakeholders. The study's participants were well-informed and experienced in the relevant field, contributing valuable insights. As a result, they were qualified to help comprehend their perspectives and messages transmitted through social media platforms. A qualitative approach was therefore ideal to understand how individuals perceived their surroundings (Fossey *et al.*,

2002:717). However, the surroundings also influence how people perceive and respond to values through their actions (behaviour), as well as how they relate to the institution to demonstrate uniformity. According to Wong (2008:14), data analysis in qualitative research is defined as the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, observation notes, or other non-textual materials that the researcher collects to enhance understanding of the area of study. Qualitative research helps researchers to gain access to or understand the thoughts and emotions of the research participants, as this enables them to develop an understanding of the meaning that people ascribe to their life experiences (Sutton & Austin, 2015:226). Omona (2013:171) further states that qualitative research places emphasis on understanding through closely examining people's words, actions and records, rather than assigning mathematical symbols to these words, actions and records. Qualitative research enables information to be fully expressed in words and ensures that, through the gathering of information, solutions can be provided. Fossey *et al.* (2002:730) state that qualitative research mainly focuses on addressing the questions that are mostly concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of people's lives and social worlds. Grove *et al.* (2012:29) further elaborate that qualitative research is a systematic and personal approach that highlights and explains an individual's daily life experience.

In the context of this study, participants created content for social media posts and could be influenced by social norms that shaped how they communicated and how they related to the values of the NWU. Therefore, the researcher allowed participants to fully share their experiences in detail, without any sense of judgment or fear of being discriminated against. In the qualitative research approach employed in this study, participants could give their views in regard to NWU values that were strategically communicated via social media platforms.

3.3 Research plan

The general research question of this study was the following:

How are social media platforms managed by the NWU to strategically communicate its values to stakeholders?

This general research question was divided into three specific research questions. Table 3.1 below illustrates the specific research questions and the research methods used to answer them, which were used as the research plan that guided the study.

Table 3.1: Research plan

Specific research question	Data collection method
1. What principles of the strategic communication management theory are applicable to communicate the NWU values to stakeholders through its social media platforms?	A literature study (see Chapter 2)
2. How does the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department perceive its management of social media platforms to strategically communicate the NWU's values to stakeholders?	Semi-structured interviews with participants at the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department
3. To what extent are the NWU values strategically communicated to stakeholders on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram?	A qualitative content analysis of the NWU's Facebook and Instagram pages

3.4 Data collection methods

Data collection is the process of gathering and measuring information on variables of interest that enables one to answer stated research questions, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes (Taherdoost, 2021:10). Data collection is essential in research, as data contributes to a better understanding of a theoretical framework (Sutton & Austin, 2015:228). In qualitative research, various tools are used to collect data, such as semi-structured interviews or observations, and may also include case studies, open-ended questions in surveys, and historical and document analyses (Taherdoost, 2021:28).

Firstly, a literature study was conducted to identify the guiding principles that were relevant to the context of the study. These principles guided the empirical part of the study. Please refer to section 1.8.1 and Chapter 2 for more details on the literature study and the guiding principles that were identified. For the empirical data collection, two qualitative data collection methods were used, namely, semi-structured interviews and content analysis. Data collection, using semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis, helped the researcher establish findings that led to conclusions and recommendations.

3.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews are essentially verbally administered questionnaires, with space for follow-up questions during the interview (Gill *et al.*, 2008:291). A Semi-structured interview is a data collection technique that involves oral questioning of participants, and the interview can be conducted with either a high or a low degree of flexibility (Chaleunvong, 2009).

According to Ruslin *et al.* (2022:22), the advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they allow researchers to acquire in-depth information and evidence from interviewees while considering the focus of the study. In contrast to an unstructured interview, where the direction is not completely considered, it gives researchers the flexibility and adaptability they need to stay on track (Ruslin *et al.*, 2022:22). Another advantage of the semi-structured interview is that it permits interviewees to be focused while still giving the investigator the autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up in the course of the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021:1360). Further, the main advantage is that the semi-structured interview method facilitates reciprocity between the interviewer and participant (Galletta, 2013:46). However, the disadvantage of the semi-structured interview is that the presence of the interviewer can influence responses.

According to Gill *et al.* (2008:292), interviews should be conducted in areas free from distractions and at locations that are most suitable for participants. The in-depth interviews are usually recorded and transcribed so that participants' comments can be coded later (Morgan & Harmon, 2001:975). The interview process and transcript analysis of the interviews conducted in this study are discussed in section 3.4.1.2 below.

3.4.1.1 Sampling

The target population is formulated or created by using a criterion to choose individuals or participants from the overall population who can share their experiences and thoughts under the most suitable settings and circumstances (Asiamah *et al.*, 2017:1612; Willie, 2022:521). Willie (2022:521) states that a population is a group of individuals with a common characteristic. The population refers to the set or group of units on which the findings of the research are based and sampling refers to a small representative portion of the population (Shukla, 2020:2). Omona (2013:167) states that sampling is a key component that helps achieve the desired research outcome through the sampled population the researcher has selected and the method by which data will be collected.

This study used purposive sampling, which means that the chosen participants were well-informed individuals (du Plooy, 2009:255). Rai and Thapa (2015:12) explain that purposive sampling is a method in which decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher, based upon a variety of criteria, which may include the individual's knowledge of the research issue, or capacity and willingness to participate in the research. Etikan *et al.* (2016:2) define purposive sampling as the deliberate selection of a participant due to the qualities of the participant. Furthermore, Tongco (2007:147) elaborates that the sampling technique is the most effective when studying a specific cultural domain with experienced experts present. As a result, the benefit of using purposive sampling in this study was that it permitted the researcher to select participants who were knowledgeable on the topic of the study and relevant to the study's research questions.

The targeted population was the Corporate Relations and Marketing department, from which the researcher purposively sampled the management and practitioners involved in developing the strategy and communicating the values of the NWU on social media platforms. Consequently, the participants had an in-depth understanding of the topic. The researcher focused on including individuals who were mainly involved in communicating the university's values to internal and external stakeholders, specifically using social media platforms. Therefore, the chosen individuals understood the issue under investigation. The participants were allowed to communicate their experiences, perceptions and opinions about the topic.

Eight participants from the Corporate Relations and Marketing department, from the corporate communication director to social media practitioners, were part of the chosen sample. However, the researcher faced a few challenges due to the unavailability of participants. The researcher attempted to resend invitations and rescheduled interviews several times. In the end, three interviews were conducted, and the analysis of the findings was based on the perceptions of these three participants, who assisted in providing their perceptions of communicating NWU values on social media. The three interviewees covered a management perspective and a practitioner's perspective. Table 3.2 provides the profiles of the participants who were invited and the interviews that were conducted.

Table 3.2: Participant profile

Designated role	Face-to-face interview or online via MS Teams	Date of interview
Director: NWU Corporate Communication	Online interview via MS Teams	19 February 2025
Director: NWU Marketing and Student Recruitment	No response	
Acting Director: NWU Stakeholder Relations	Declined the interview request	
Senior Manager: NWU Digital Communication and Brand Management	The interview was rescheduled several times, but due to academic obligations, the interview had to be cancelled.	
Manager: NWU Digital Marketing	No response	
NWU Corporate Communication Practitioner	Face-to-face interview	28 February 2025
NWU Corporate Communication Practitioner	Face-to-face interview	24 February 2025
NWU Corporate Communication Practitioner	Participant was unavailable due to bereavement	

3.4.1.2 Semi-structured interview process and data analysis

According to Rabionet (2011:563), qualitative interviewing is a flexible and powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways people make meaning of their experience. Learning to conduct semi-structured interviews requires the following six stages: (1) selecting the type of interview, (2) establishing ethical guidelines, (3) crafting the interview protocol, (4) conducting and recording the interview, (5) analysing and summarising the interview, and (6) reporting the findings. These stages were applied in this study and are outlined in Chapter 3, which focuses on the research methods, and Chapters 4 and 5, which discuss the research findings.

In this study, e-mails were sent to invite prospective participants for semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the study was explained, and they received informed consent forms to sign before any interview took place. Those participants who agreed to an interview indicated a suitable date and time and also whether they preferred a face-to-face interview or an online interview via MS Teams (as indicated in Table 3.2 above).

Gill *et al.* (2008:291) allude that semi-structured interviews should consist of several key questions that help define the area to be explored. An interview schedule with key questions was developed (see Table 3.3), based on the principles identified in the literature study (see Chapter 2).

Table 3.3: Interview schedule

Grand opening questions 1. Would you begin by telling me what the first things are that come into your mind when you think of the NWU's values? 2. To what extent do you feel that these values are portrayed or communicated on the NWU's Facebook and Instagram platforms? Why or why not? 3. Who do you think are the most important stakeholders of the NWU? 4. Please describe how you strategically communicate the NWU's values on the social media pages to these stakeholders.	
Guiding principle	Questions *Only ask the relevant questions if the participant has not already provided an answer through the above general opening questions. Use these questions as a guide for the semi-structured conversation.
Alignment with institutional strategy	Briefly explain in your own words how you see the NWU's vision, mission and strategy. To what extent are the institution's values part of the department's communication strategy?

Stakeholder identification	How do you ensure that the values communicated on social media platforms are for the intended recipient? How do you use social media platforms to communicate and share the NWU's values with specific stakeholder groups? How do you think stakeholders perceive the communication of NWU values on social media pages? To what extent do you choose a certain social media platform for specific content? Provide some examples where you developed content for a specific stakeholder group on certain social media platforms.
Social media platforms as strategic channels	How are the social media platforms managed by your department? Do the identified social media platforms reach the objectives set by the NWU to communicate its values? What is the relevance of social media platforms in communicating the NWU values? How do you determine the most effective social media channels or platforms to communicate the values to stakeholders (when creating content about the values)?
Purposive and intentional communication	How are the values of the institution purposefully communicated and incorporated on social media platforms? Please provide examples. To what extent are the values of the institution strategically incorporated in the content posted on social media? Please provide examples. How do they ensure that there is consistent and deliberate communication of NWU values on social media platforms? What purpose does it serve for the NWU to strategically communicate its values to stakeholders via social media?

Engagement on social media	How do you create interactivity on Facebook and Instagram when strategically communicating NWU values? How does the content on social media platforms create dialogue between stakeholders and the institution? Please provide examples. How do the values communicated on social media platforms promote participation and interaction on Facebook and Instagram? To what extent do you receive feedback about the values on social media?
Is there anything you would like to add to the conversation?	

The interviews (face-to-face and online) were recorded on the researcher's laptop, and each interview lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. When a researcher uses audio recording to collect data, the recordings must be transcribed verbatim before data analysis can begin (Sutton & Austin, 2015:227). Therefore, the audio recordings were transcribed. The recordings and transcriptions were kept in a password-protected file for a period of five years.

Henderson (2016:74) stipulates that qualitative data analysis is a process of describing, classifying and interconnecting phenomena. Furthermore, qualitative content analysis can follow a structured, linear approach or a more creative, iterative process. Like any skill, it becomes more refined and manageable with continued practice over time (Stuckey, 2015:010). In this study, qualitative content analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts using a deductive approach, based on the same principles identified in Chapter 2, which were used to develop the interview schedule. The three interview transcripts were read multiple times and checked against the recordings to ensure accuracy (Matheson, 2007:549). The predetermined principles (themes) from the literature study served as the initial coding framework, enabling the systematic identification of text segments relevant to each theme (Williams & Moser, 2019:47). Coding was carried out by colouring (highlighting) quotes in the transcripts that aligned with these principles (Richards & Hemphill, 2018:227). The coded data were then organised according to the highlighted colours and compared across participants to identify similarities and differences (Richards & Hemphill, 2018:227). Finally, the findings were interpreted and conclusions drawn based on the participants' perceptions (Richards & Hemphill, 2018:231). Participants were deidentified in the reporting of the data by assigning a pseudonym to each participant, for example, referring to them as Participant A, Participant B, and Participant C.

3.4.2 Qualitative content analysis of social media pages

According to Roller (2019:2), qualitative content analysis is a research method that shares many of the defining attributes of qualitative inquiry more broadly. Elo and Kyngäs (2008:114) note that it can be applied using either an inductive or deductive approach to develop a model that captures and explains the phenomenon under study. Lindgren *et al.* (2020:2) further emphasise that qualitative content analysis can encompass both descriptive and interpretative dimensions, enabling the researcher to examine latent content and to uncover depth and meaning within participants' expressions. The qualitative content analysis in this study focused on posts published on the official Facebook and Instagram pages of the NWU during the period January 2024 to June 2024. This timeframe was selected as it coincided with the NWU's "20 years of greatness" campaign, which celebrated two decades of the university's existence following the institutional merger (see section 1.1). The researcher specifically chose the "20 years of greatness" campaign that applied to the study because the institution used the period to strategically communicate the milestones registered by the institution through these values, which are accurate representations of how far the university has come. The researcher spent six months selecting the pages for analysis to acquire a better grasp of the posting of content communicated on social media platforms and how it was incorporated into the values that the study focused on. The analysis aimed to examine the extent to which the NWU's values were strategically communicated to stakeholders on these platforms.

According to Elo and Kyngäs (2008:114), qualitative content analysis may be conducted inductively or deductively, with the latter enabling the application of pre-determined categories derived from theory or prior research. The researcher again adopted a deductive approach to qualitative content analysis, guided by principles (themes) identified in the literature. The analysis sought to determine whether the NWU's values were explicitly and consistently communicated in the content shared during the campaign period, and whether these communications reflected the principles outlined in strategic communication literature.

The unit of analysis (Rogers, 2021:10) comprised individual posts on Facebook and Instagram, including the accompanying text, images, videos and other creative elements. Engagement metrics, such as stakeholder likes, comments, shares and interactions, were also examined to understand how audiences engaged with the values communicated. The population for analysis (Singh *et al.*, 2019:103) was limited to content published on these two official social media platforms, as they are primary social media channels through which the NWU engages stakeholders. The selection of platforms aligns with the view that purposive sampling in qualitative research should focus on sources most relevant to the research objectives (Campbell *et al.*,

2020:654). Each post in the selected six months was reviewed to identify evidence of institutional values within its visual and textual components. Thereafter, the data were arranged according to the identified principles from the literature study. In line with Dawadi (2021:63) and Roller (2019:3), the coding process was conducted in a manner that preserved the richness of qualitative data. This categorisation facilitated an analysis of how strategically (according to the guiding principles for strategic communication management on social media) the NWU's values were communicated over the six-month period.

3.5 Ethical consideration

Ethical considerations are fundamental in research to safeguard both the researcher and participants. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, which outlined the study's aims, potential risks and the responsibilities of both the researcher and participants. These documents also affirmed participants' privacy rights and explained the security measures and legal protections in place (Beskow *et al.*, 2001:2315).

The researcher ensured that the interviews adhered to ethical protocols and were based on voluntary participation. Participants were fully informed about ethical principles governing the study, including anonymity and confidentiality. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) (ethics number: NWU-01000-24-A7) and the North-West University Gatekeeper Committee, ensuring that the research was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards. Please see section 1.9 for more information about the ethical aspects of this study.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the qualitative methods employed in this study, emphasising the importance of a clear research methodology in providing a structured framework to achieve reliable outcomes. The use of semi-structured interviews alongside qualitative content analysis has demonstrated the value of collecting rich, contextual data to understand the phenomenon under investigation. The following two chapters will present the findings generated through the application of the described methods.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS OBTAINED THROUGH SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the research approach and methods employed to collect data. This chapter will analyse the perceptions obtained through semi-structured interviews with the relevant participants from the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing Department. This chapter will answer specific research question 2: *How does the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department perceive its management of social media platforms to strategically communicate the NWU's values to stakeholders?* The discussion of the findings from the semi-structured interviews is based on the guiding principles set out in Chapter 2.

4.2 Strategic communication management theory

The theory highlights the importance of strategic and effective management of communication messages and the appropriate selection of channels. This aligns with the present study, which advocated that NWU's values should be strategically communicated through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. These platforms facilitate the transmission of messages created to reach the university's diverse stakeholders. The theory supports purposeful communication that aligns with the institution's strategy, ensuring that the university's values are strategically conveyed via social media channels to engage the intended stakeholders (see Chapter 2).

4.2.1 Alignment with institutional strategy

As indicated in section 2.2.1 and Table 2.1, alignment with institutional strategy refers to the strategic communication of the NWU's values on social media platforms in a manner that supports the institution's vision and mission and contributes to the realisation of its strategies. This entails consistently embedding the NWU's values within the core messages shared with stakeholders, ensuring that these values are clearly present, portrayed and reinforced in social media communication.

Participants agreed that various goals and strategies are derived from the communication audit conducted by the institution to better understand its stakeholders, and accordingly, it uses platforms to communicate the NWU values to stakeholders. An annual communication audit was undertaken by the NWU to determine stakeholders' perceptions of the institution's communication efforts. Participant A elaborated that goals and strategies used to form part of creating stories resonating with the NWU values are driven by a communication audit undertaken by the institution: *"I believe that for our goals and strategies to be effective, we must draw them from the communication audit done."* Participant B further elaborated that organisational goals and strategies extend beyond alignment with the core values of North-West University (NWU). They represent an ongoing process of adapting to the evolving perspectives of diverse stakeholders, demonstrating social responsiveness and incorporating the dynamic behavioural patterns of content consumers as part of a continuous learning approach. Participant B noted: *"The NWU understands that it has diverse stakeholders and that it is important to be socially responsive in communicating, being transparent and being part of the community."* Additionally, participant C indicated that the formulation of NWU's communication goals and strategies is influenced by the characteristics of its target audience and the strategic use of key platforms to ensure content remains engaging and impactful. Participant C stated that *"goals and strategies are crafted from the audience and key platforms used by the institution to communicate NWU values."*

According to the participants, the goals and strategies underpinning NWU's communication practices are informed by the outcomes of a comprehensive institutional communication audit. This audit serves as a foundational tool for gaining deeper insights into audience behaviour patterns, ensuring alignment with NWU's core values, and enhancing the relevance of communication efforts. Moreover, it facilitates transparency in the pursuit of the communication audit's intended objectives, reinforcing accountability and strategic clarity in the university's communication approach. As a result, goals and strategies can only be achieved when NWU is socially responsive, continually adapts to stakeholders' tastes and preferences, and ensures that the institution is part of the broader community.

Additionally, participants affirm that every component of the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department is critical in strategically communicating the NWU values through understanding the role it wants to address and achieve through the designated social media platforms. Participant A suggested that strategic communication is fundamental in guiding purposeful messaging at NWU. It involves the deliberate use of appropriate and targeted platforms to facilitate stakeholder engagement and effectively convey the institution's core values: *"The corporate communication component uses strategic communication to communicate with stakeholders through stories that resonate with them and align with the values using various*

platforms to engage with stakeholders.” Furthermore, participant B noted that the strategic communication dimension encompasses a wide range of critical issues, thereby enhancing its effectiveness in conveying NWU’s institutional values through platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Participant B mentioned the following: “The strategic communication function lies in understanding why there is communication, what it stands for, and how this communication is different from other institutions such as the University of Johannesburg or other organisations that embody organisational values in them.” Additionally, participant C elaborated that strategic communication can only be achieved through understanding communication objectives and institutional goals: “The communication audit assists the institution to strategically communicate and manage platforms to effectively achieve its goals.”

From the participants’ perspectives, the institution (the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department) plays a pivotal role in the strategic communication of NWU’s values through social media platforms. This role includes expressing the underlying objectives and rationale for communication, while aligning messaging with the broader vision and mission of the university to ensure coherence and purpose in its digital engagement efforts. Strategic communication provides clarity for producing purposeful communication, as it enables the message to be concise, represent the stakeholders and improve transparency in the engagement. According to the participants, strategic communication should be understood not merely as a means of engaging with stakeholders but as a deliberate effort to position institutional values within the social media landscape. This approach aims to influence stakeholder alignment and foster meaningful engagement through value-driven digital presence.

Based on the aforementioned perspectives, it is evident that the participants are committed to attaining the NWU’s goals and strategies, since the institution directly interacts with its stakeholders to establish engagement and key platforms to communicate its mandate. The research done through the communication audit steers the participants’ communication efforts to ensure that the NWU is socially responsive in nature. Their communication is not only limited to stories of inspiration or resonating with values, but the participants believe it also impacts the lives of stakeholders and communities, using the same values to demonstrate transparency and honesty.

Participants’ perceptions also indicate that strategic communication can only be achieved when a shared understanding exists from the outset between stakeholders and the NWU. The university’s values must be communicated strategically and managed appropriately through social media platforms. While the NWU employs strategic communication, it also assumes the role of engaging stakeholders, which fosters responsibility and accountability as integral aspects

of its values. Effective management of social media platforms facilitates purposeful communication, positioning these channels as tools to enhance dialogue. Moreover, the participants believe that the NWU's distinctive approach to communication should set them apart from other institutions.

4.2.2 Stakeholder identification

As outlined in Section 2.2.2 and Table 2.1, the operational definition of stakeholder identification refers to the process of identifying NWU's stakeholders who engage via social media platforms, enabling the institution to customise communication strategies that address their specific needs. The communication of values on social media platforms should be inclusive, ensuring that messages resonate with and represent the diversity of the NWU's stakeholder base. Furthermore, the NWU should recognise and understand the diverse groups that engage with and relate to the NWU's values on social media platforms. This involves analysing stakeholders' perspectives, as reflected in their engagement and feedback on social media, to gain insight into how they interpret and apply these values.

Firstly, the interviewees explained that various stakeholders should be addressed and that their feedback is important. For example, participant A mentioned: *"We have primary stakeholders such as students and staff members and internally we serve and encourage them to share their views."*

Furthermore, participants agreed that there are distinct factors that influence stakeholders' perspectives and that measures should be taken to ensure the university's values are strategically communicated on Facebook and Instagram. For example, Participant A noted that the stakeholders' perspectives are shaped by the specific audience being addressed on social media at any given moment. Additionally, participant B explained that a variety of indicators highlight the stakeholder's perspective on the communication distributed via social media platforms. Similarly, participant C emphasised that stakeholders' perspectives are assessed through the use of performance indicators and analytics tools employed by the institution, which enable more precise targeting of communication initiatives on various social media platforms: *"The stakeholder perspective is conducted, and we use analytics like surveys and responses to better understand our stakeholders and act on what we compel."*

From the participant's perspective, analytics are used to understand stakeholders' negative and positive reactions to the content communicated. This also allows stakeholders to share their views

and inform the NWU of their understanding and position on the values. The responses from stakeholders ensure that the needs of the diverse group of stakeholders are known. However, the platforms should not only serve to record the stakeholders' perspectives; they should also be used as tools for educating, informing, and shaping the perceptions that the NWU wishes to develop with stakeholders. This is important in guiding how people view the NWU, particularly while strategically communicating the NWU values across social media platforms.

It became clear that the participants recognised the role of diverse stakeholders in communicating the NWU values effectively and strategically across diverse social media platforms. The interviewees explained that engaging with stakeholders is essential for enhancing their comprehension of NWU's values and for highlighting their interpretations within the broader communication framework. For example, participant A emphasised that the role of diverse stakeholders and their contribution to strategically communicate the NWU values is seen on the communication audit report: *"The communication audit assists the institution to identify stakeholders and what diversifies them, also to find ways to interact with them effectively."* Participant B stressed the importance of diverse stakeholders and how to communicate with them, while ensuring that others do not feel neglected in the process. Participant B also stated the following: *"We must understand their needs by knowing who our internal and external stakeholders are and then share stories that resonate with them specifically, but also highlight the values in them."*

Participant C stated that, as employees within NWU's Corporate Relations and Marketing department, effectively addressing the needs of all stakeholders requires a clear understanding of each stakeholder's role within the institution, as well as an awareness of how they as employees relate to and embody the university's values: *"The fact is that the university is a diverse environment, we get people from different ethnic groups, sexual orientations and we must communicate to cater for each group. And through this, we are able to communicate in diverse ways and satisfy their needs, and we have not had any problem with their ability to interact."*

According to the interviewees, different stakeholders play an important role in the communicated content since they represent their groups, enabling the institution to strategically promote NWU values through content that resonates with them. However, it appeared that the communication audit mentioned had not been explicitly communicated or made accessible to the broader stakeholder groups. The communication audit could probably identify the needs of stakeholders such as current students, internal employees and even alumni. However, other stakeholders, such as prospective students, for example, were not included in the communication audit. As a result, their communication expectations and needs were not addressed. Nevertheless, it was

evident that the participants understood the importance of communicating with stakeholders to understand their expected contribution and how they could increase the shared views on the platforms.

Based on the above perspectives, it is evident that stakeholders' perceptions are important in assisting to shape the content communicated on social media platforms to reflect the values of the university and allow individuals not only to share their experiences but also to add value to the content shared. This should yield meaningful and impactful engagement that will enhance the shared views. The constant engagement on these platforms, with feedback from stakeholders, ensures that stakeholders and the NWU align with the values that are communicated on Facebook and Instagram. Furthermore, it can be deduced that the interviewees believed that diverse stakeholders were consistently informed and communicated with to enhance interaction amongst them. This set a tone for prospective stakeholders to want to align with the NWU. The participants seemed to embrace diversity and ensured that the department catered to its stakeholders when communicating with them on social media. The participants' opinions reflect an understanding of raising awareness about the NWU values with diverse stakeholders across social media platforms.

4.2.3 Social media platforms as strategic channels

In its operational definition, as highlighted in section 2.2.3 and Table 2.1, social media platforms as strategic channels of communication refer to the deliberate selection and effective management of designated platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, to communicate the NWU's values. These platforms serve as essential media for crafting and sharing content where the NWU's values are clearly identifiable, enabling targeted and meaningful engagement with stakeholders. Strategic use of these channels enhances interaction and ensures that the communication of values is optimised through the deliberate and effective selection of the correct social media channel for each message.

During the interviews, the participants agreed that channels used by the institution are very important in communicating with the stakeholders, as they highlight the NWU values in the content shared. The nature and type of stakeholders determine how the content is created for each channel. Participant A stated that the institution uses a variety of channels to communicate information, for example, eFundi (the NWU's student learning system) as the digital communication platform: *"The NWU has many mediums of communication for students, staff and other stakeholders, like eFundi and digital publication platforms to communicate NWU values*

through stories.” Further, participant B elaborated that channels of the institution are determined by the nature and type of stakeholders they want to communicate with during that particular period: *“Our channels for communication are there, but how we communicate NWU values using them is dependent on the nature of stakeholders and the type of stakeholders they wish to communicate with.”* Participant C believed that all the communication channels are integrated to cater for stakeholders who are the target audience when communicating content that resonates with the NWU values. Participant C mentioned: *“The institutional medium of communication is integrated, and they highlight the values on the content that is shared.”*

From the interviews, it became clear that all three participants considered social media platforms as critical, highlighting that the social media platforms managed by the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing departments are content-centric in terms of the values communicated and how these values are conveyed using various social media platforms. In addition, the interviewees presumed that the NWU’s values were regularly highlighted through general posts and video reels across these social media platforms. Participant A explained that the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department manages the platforms to communicate with its stakeholders using different social media platforms, which are purposefully designed for certain stakeholders. Participant A added: *“As Corporate Communications, we provide content that is communicated on various social media platforms and share their experiences on the provided platforms.”* Participant A further expressed that the NWU uses a range of communication platforms to share information, which enhances the effectiveness of its communication strategies: *“The institution uses various platforms to share information regarding the values, such as Facebook posts and Instagram reels, which can also be seen on our digital website, where information sharing is done.”*

Participant B stated that each platform used by the institution had content specific to that platform, and the manner in which values are communicated may vary based on the tone and nature of the content shared across platforms. For example, some platforms may employ humour and trending content, but others may adopt a serious tone that emphasises their platform's perspective. Participant B stated that *“from a digital perspective, the platforms incorporate values which are content specific to ensure that platforms create communication of NWU values to address the needs of diverse stakeholders.”* Participant B explained that the institution shared information through its platforms, each intentionally structured to align with the specific needs and preferences of its various stakeholders: *“Information sharing occurs in various platforms of NWU and the tone of messages is expressed in different ways, for an example, in LinkedIn, the tone is slightly formal in its language, while in TikTok it is humorous in its nature.”*

From the participants' perspectives, selecting the most suitable social media channel is a critical step in the development of effective and targeted content for these platforms. This aligns directly with the guiding principle that social media platforms function as strategic channels, serving not only as tools for distribution but as purposeful spaces through which the NWU's values can be communicated deliberately and effectively. The participants also emphasised that the Corporate Relations and Marketing department plays an important role in managing these channels to ensure that messages are strategically created and targeted to specific stakeholders. It can be deduced that the participants understood that before information sharing can occur, the appropriate platforms must be identified and established. The interviewees believed that the messages they create for the different social media platforms resonate with intended stakeholders, while reflecting the NWU's values. Based on these perspectives, it is evident that the Corporate Relations and Marketing department believed that the social media platforms used were carefully selected to reach targeted audiences effectively. The core message remains consistent, but the tone may be adapted to suit the characteristics of each platform.

4.2.4 Purposive and intentional communication

The operational definition for purposive and intentional communication (see section 2.2.4 and Table 2.1) refers to the consistent, deliberate and strategic use of social media platforms to convey the NWU's values in a manner that fully represents what the institution stands for. This entails creating and sharing content that purposefully and transparently integrates the NWU's values, ensuring that it aligns with the institution's vision and mission. Such communication is designed to reinforce the values on social media platforms.

The participants all agreed that purposive communication is driven by the specified communication objectives to be achieved when communicating on various social media platforms. Participant A highlighted that purposive communication happens when individuals share their stories using NWU platforms to communicate their shared values with the institution, and these stories are centred on the NWU values. This participant specifically stated that *"purposive communication is achieved when stories of individuals resonate with the NWU values and are shared with the NWU community using specified platforms"*. Participant A further says: *"...content provided on social media platforms to tell a story of inspirational individuals that are relevant to what the institution stands for."* Overall, participant A suggested that content communicated on the various social media platforms focuses on individuals that align with the values of the university.

Similarly, participant B explained that content communicated on the various social media platforms is not only about informing the stakeholders of what happens within the university, but also about communicating content that resonates with the NWU values. Participant B explicitly said that *“the content communicated on the NWU platforms resonates with NWU values, and in the content designed, it focuses on inclusivity, surrounding communities and beyond the borders of NWU, of individuals who have directly or indirectly been impacted by the institution.”* Participant B further indicated that the institution’s values are intentionally conveyed on social media platforms through the integration of rich and meaningful content, inclusive messaging, and uplifting narratives of former alumni whose continued success beyond NWU reflects and reinforces those values: *“For purposive communication to be visible in social media platforms, the content shared must be rich, inclusive and positive stories of different stakeholders.”*

In the same vein, participant C explained that the institution purposively communicates by sharing articles and stories on social media platforms that resonate with NWU values, for example, the NWU’s story of a student that succeeded despite hardships, that portrays the values of excellence and transparency: *“The institution purposively communicates NWU values through writing of articles on social media platforms and shares these stories that resonate with the values.”* Participant C gave another example, where the department posted about ground-breaking research conducted by a school at the NWU, and believes that this enables stakeholders to resonate with dreaming big by becoming agents of change in their fields and contributing to research. According to participant C, this will be recognised as excellence in all endeavours and highlighted in the content communicated on social media platforms.

However, the participants believe that NWU’s content strategy extends beyond merely highlighting achievements. It also reflects and reinforces the institution’s core values. The communication practitioners communicate through stories that speak to life challenges. An example given by participant B is content on social media about ordinary students (primary stakeholders) helping each other with food. These stories resonate and communicate the inclusive and diverse nature of the institution.

From the above perspectives, purposive communication is seen as an intentional objective to highlight the values in the content posted and shared with stakeholders. Participants indicated that the content shared across the institution’s social media platforms highlights individuals whose actions and narratives embody its core values. This is purposefully done through inspiring stories of triumph, excellence in the workplace, and major advancements in research.

Based on the perspectives presented, it is evident that to achieve purposeful and intentional communication, the stories communicated on social media platforms must reflect the NWU’s

values, emphasising the positive outcomes they bring to both stakeholders and the NWU. Notably, the interviewees believed that purposive communication entails that both parties (the NWU and its stakeholders) should contribute towards the development of ideas, stories and content that align with the NWU's core values. Participants A and B depicted the view that purposeful communication is not only limited to the individual stories shared to highlight values, but also extends to consistent and deliberate communication. Participant A stated, "*consistency and deliberate communication are found in the content communicated on platforms that is engaging, and stakeholders can relate with it.*" Participant B also mentioned that the institution uses a variety of methods to communicate consistently and deliberately, such as the use of hashtags on content posted: "*We publish information that speaks to the values of the university and use hashtags that hold values in them to highlight the visibility of their purpose.*" Participant C agreed that communication is indeed deliberate and consistent.

These perspectives indicate that hashtags are used to carry messages and highlight the values communicated on social media platforms. In addition, hashtags give stakeholders an opportunity to express themselves using the very same hashtags as in the original post. Overall, it can be inferred that the consistent posting of content and strategic use of hashtags on social media platforms contribute to how audiences connect with NWU's shared experiences and institutional values.

4.2.5 Engagement on social media

Engagement on social media refers to the creation and management of interactive content that fosters dialogue between the NWU and its stakeholders, with the NWU's values serving as the foundation for these interactions. This involves creating posts that encourage participation, invite feedback and promote conversation about the values. Strategic engagement ensures that interactions are more than "likes" on social media, but include comments, shares, interaction and co-creation of content that reflect the NWU's values in the public domain (see section 2.2.5 and Table 2.1).

All three interviewees believed that the department and communication practitioners create engagement on social media platforms through content that sparks dialogue, participation and feedback. For example, participant B explained that participation and interaction are achieved through engaging content that sparks conversation: "*The institution achieves participation and interaction through engaging content and conversation that sparks interest for both stakeholders and the university.*" Participant B noted further: "*Dialogue is created through content that is*

engaging, relevant and leaves the university with a social footprint of dialogue that resonates with stakeholders on social media platforms.”

The participants also felt that dialogue is formed through the sharing of stories that are aligned with the NWU values, which are communicated using social media platforms. Participant A explained: *“Individuals tell their stories through designated social media platforms, which create dialogue as stakeholders and the organisation resonate with the values”*. Similarly, participant C asserted that participation and interaction are highlighted through storytelling and stakeholders engaging with what is communicated: *“The stories we tell are what inform the participation and interaction amongst stakeholders and organisation.”*

Besides the stories, participant C mentioned that the NWU uses various other forms of posts, such as articles, to create dialogue. By incorporating elements of informing, persuading and educating through articles that relate to the NWU values, discussions on social media are created. For example, the NWU hosted the Pahad Memorial Lecture, and the communication practitioners wrote an article for publication on social media platforms that sparked dialogue. Participant B explained that *“the NWU organises lectures or colloquia and then we write articles which create dialogue on social media through their informative, persuasive and educational nature.”*

Furthermore, participant B indicated that effective management of social media platforms to foster engagement between stakeholders and the institution involves not only the creation of compelling content but also timely responsiveness and the provision of meaningful feedback. This participant provided an example of feedback that reflects the values of the NWU: *“When students enquire about issues regarding NSFAS by commenting on a post that is not relevant to their question..., it is important to still reply to the comment and provide timely feedback on the question.”* It can be deduced that feedback from the NWU on social media on questions that are important to the stakeholders (but do not even relate to the post) contributes to living out the NWU values, such as the value of being caring in this case.

Participants indicated that stakeholder engagement and involvement, alongside responses from the university, provide essential insights for the department, guiding plans to improve its communication on social media platforms. Participant A particularly noted that social media allows stakeholders to share experiences, resulting in a chance to improve performance when communicating NWU values: *“Participation and interaction create room for improvement when communicating and engaging with stakeholders when using social media platforms.”* Participant C also mentioned that *“the feedback is taken into account when communicating and improving the content shared”*. From the above, it is evident that the management of social media platforms assists in understanding the stakeholders. Furthermore, it can be deduced that when

stakeholders provide feedback, it becomes clear to what extent they relate to the values communicated. From the participant's perspective, for NWU values to be strategically communicated using social media platforms, the university must allow stakeholders to share their experiences that resonate with the values and that assist stakeholders in relating to the content that is communicated. Through stories and shared experiences, social media posts can foster engagement. Furthermore, it can be deduced that storytelling is positioned strategically to enhance participation and interaction amongst stakeholders and the NWU.

It appears that participants agree that social media platforms should be used by stakeholders to communicate ideas, collaborate, and share insights on NWU ideals. The values are also lived out by the communication practitioners when responding in a caring manner to questions on social media platforms. Dialogue and feedback from stakeholders on social media are used to improve and create more engaging content. In conclusion, the interviewees recognise that participation and interaction should be encouraged via social media platforms, seeing that social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, in the context of this study, play a vital role in communicating the NWU values.

4.3 Conclusion

The chapter focused on answering specific research question 2 that stated:

How does the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department perceive its management of social media platforms to strategically communicate the NWU's values to stakeholders?

Guided by the principles identified in the strategic communication management theory, the findings obtained through semi-structured interviews were presented in this chapter. The chapter provided insight into the perceptions of the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department regarding their management of social media platforms to strategically communicate the NWU's values to stakeholders.

The participants' perceptions played a pivotal role in fostering a shared understanding between stakeholders and the institution, serving to guide and reinforce meaningful engagement. The effective management of social media platforms can achieve purposeful communication, which sets NWU apart from other institutions. When diverse stakeholders align and foster spaces for interaction, they enhance their collective contribution, which in turn helps to promote and reflect shared awareness of NWU's institutional values. Furthermore, communication on social media

platforms conveys messages which should align with specific values. The perceptions of participants reflect that social media platforms must be a central place to communicate and exchange NWU values, where dialogue and feedback can enhance strategic communication about the values, and assist in posting engaging value-driven content. In the next chapter, the findings obtained through a qualitative content analysis of the NWU's Facebook and Instagram pages are discussed.

CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS OBTAINED THROUGH QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on analysing the findings retrieved through semi-structured interviews with personnel in the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department to understand their perceptions about how they use social media platforms to strategically communicate the values of NWU to various stakeholders.

In this chapter, the researcher continues to analyse the institution's two designated social media platforms, namely Facebook and Instagram. This chapter is based on specific research question 3:

To what extent are the NWU values strategically communicated to stakeholders on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram?

In answering this question, the chapter aims to investigate the extent to which the NWU values are strategically communicated to various stakeholders on social media platforms through a qualitative content analysis. The content analysis focused on posts during the first six months of 2024, from January to June, as the institution celebrated its 20th anniversary since the merger of three universities into a single, unified NWU. The campaign was called '20 years of greatness'. The qualitative content analysis in this chapter was conducted on both social media platforms to gain a better understanding of how the NWU strategically communicated its values on social media platforms during this period. The content analysis was based on the guiding principles presented in Chapter 2, which are based on strategic communication management theory.

5.2 Strategic communication management theory

The strategic communication management theory plays a significant role in the intentional communication of the NWU's values to stakeholders and in aligning this communication on social media with the institution's overall vision, mission and strategy. In addition, the importance of this theory not only focuses on communicating the institutional values but also focuses on the institution being strategic and intentional in communicating its values through social media platforms. Furthermore, the theory promotes stakeholder engagement as it is based on goals and

emphasises using the correct social media platforms to communicate and convey messages to relevant stakeholders (see Chapter 2).

5.2.1 Alignment with institutional strategy

The strategic communication management theory plays an important role in advocating for the institution's strategy because it emphasises the relevance of strategy in accomplishing the desired goals and objectives that are in line with the institution's values on all social media platforms. (see section 2.2.1). The theory affirms that strategic usage of social media platforms advances the institution's vision and mission, contributes towards the achievement of goals, and ensures that effective communication conveys the values the institution prioritises. Strategic communication management theory further clarifies the function of platforms in the modern era as essential tools for conveying key messages. In this context, NWU's values are deliberately embedded in social media messaging to effectively reach and engage relevant stakeholder groups (see section 2.2.2).

This explanation aligns with the operational definition, as indicated in Table 2.1, and refers to the strategic communication of the NWU's values on social media platforms in a manner that supports the institution's vision and mission and contributes to the realisation of its strategies. This entails consistently embedding the NWU's values within the core messages shared with stakeholders, ensuring that these values are clearly present, portrayed and reinforced in social media communication.

As of September 2025, NWU's Instagram account (my_nwu) had 55.4k followers, was following 1,234 accounts, and had shared 1,170 posts. In comparison, its Facebook page had 53k followers and was following 27 accounts. These records show that the NWU is active on social media accounts and continuously posts content, which includes various types of posts, ranging from static images to carousels, videos, reels, stories, and educational posts. According to the posts analysed, the NWU attempts to communicate key instrumental information through these platforms by creating static content or videos that incorporate segments of diverse sports, different races that enhance social cohesion, arts, dance, and the representation of stakeholders' demographics that are important to the institution. For example, videos uploaded on these platforms seem to stand for the values of the NWU and are inclusive of relevant stakeholders such as high school learners and individuals with disability.

In addition, looking at the NWU's 20th anniversary documentaries posted on social media platforms, it is apparent that the core mandate of the institution is to take responsibility for ensuring that social community engagement is continuously communicated. An example of this type of post is the contribution NWU makes towards the Ikateleng Programme (see Figure 5.1). The Ikateleng Programme provides support to Grade 12 learners across multiple provinces by providing tutoring classes in English, Mathematics and Physical Science. In the documentary, there is engagement between the university and the relevant stakeholders involved, namely the learners and parents. In addition, this demonstrates that the NWU uses its social media platforms to create awareness of the institutional values and how it contributes to society – aligning with the NWU's vision, mission and strategic goals.



Figure 5.1: Ikateleng Programme

The NWU's values and what the university stands for are constantly represented in written communication, with efforts made to ensure that stakeholders understand its institutional identity. This plan aligns with the institution's core goals and strategies. The NWU's unitary model advocates for unity, excellence and inclusivity, which are embedded in various social media posts.

For example, a post shared on 4 April 2024 on Instagram (Figure 5.2) emphasises the development of the Amphitheatre, demonstrating the institution's effective communication of its infrastructure upgrades.

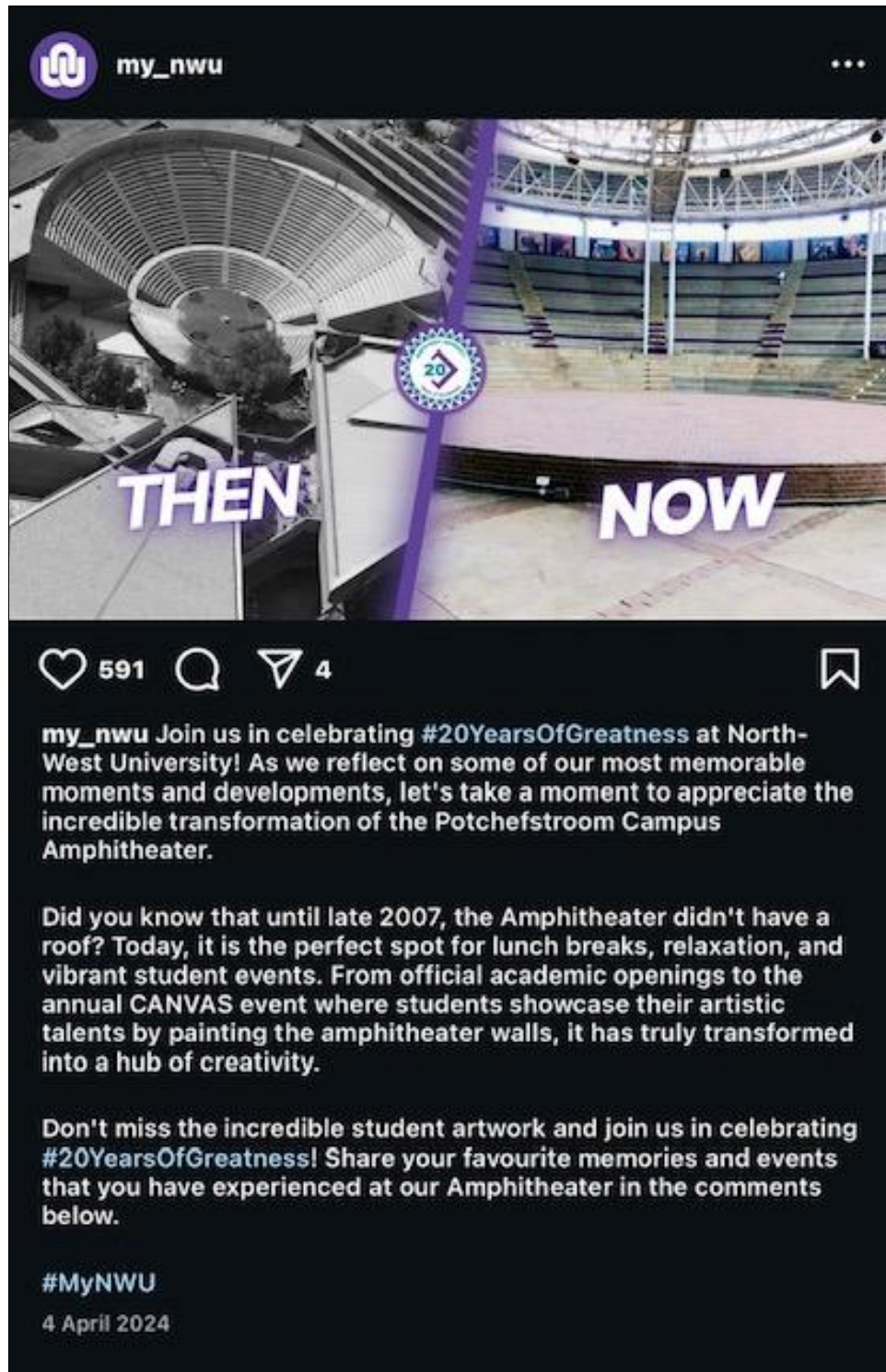


Figure 5.2: Development reflection

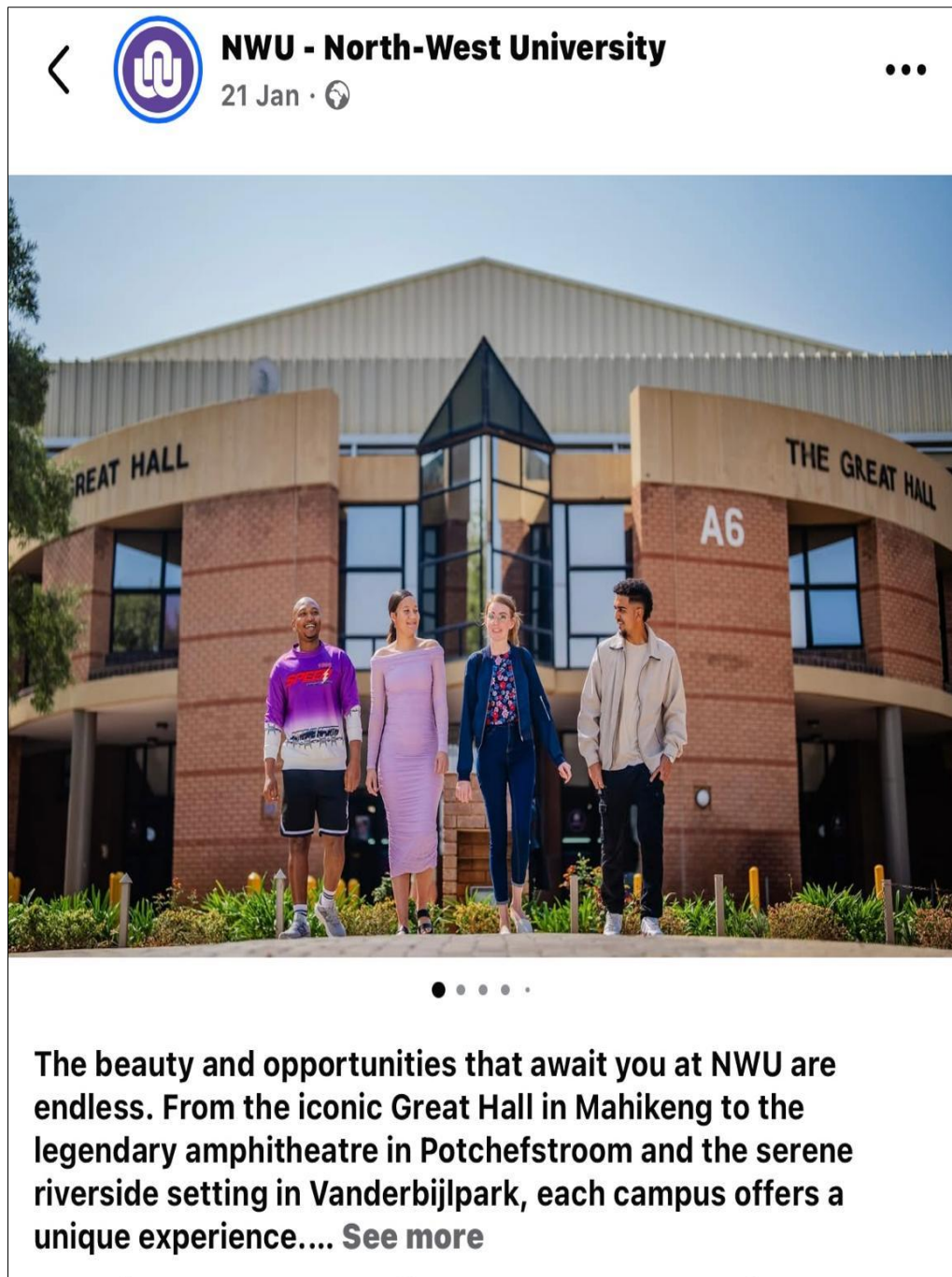


Figure 5.3: Mahikeng Great Hall

Likewise, the post shared on 11 April 2024 on the same platform (Figure 5.3) illustrates the transformation of the Mahikeng Great Hall, highlighting that the building is more than just a physical structure. It symbolises a place where institutional values are lived out and achieved. This occurs through events such as graduations, which demonstrate the institution's values, such as excellence in its endeavours.



Figure 5.4: SAIOH Winners

As an international institution, NWU plays an important role in impacting the lives of relevant stakeholders and engaging in key projects that align with and advocate for its institutional values communicated on social media platforms. For example, a post (Figure 5.4) reflected the achievements obtained by Monica Young, who was awarded Tertiary Student of the Year for her outstanding academic performance, and Marelize Van Ree, who received the article of the year for her groundbreaking research on emissions and exposures in additive manufacturing. These achievements also reflect the NWU's value of excellence in its endeavours, illustrating how the institution aligns stakeholders with goals and strategies that will equip them to be competitive globally.



Figure 5.5: Tinyiko Sithole in Excellence

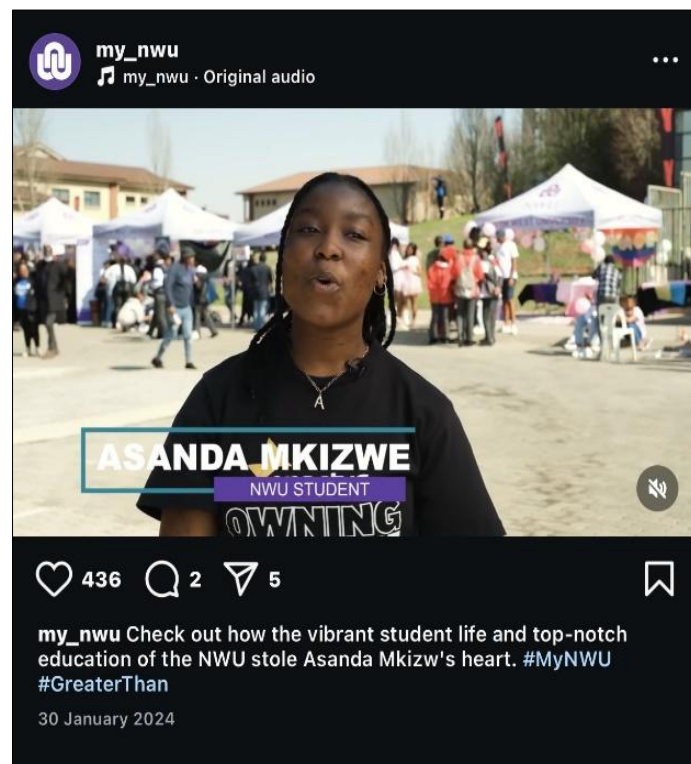


Figure 5.6: Asanda in Student Vibrancy

The post of Tinyiko Sithole (26 January 2024), based at the Potchefstroom campus, shares an inspirational story as it challenges the view that the Pukke campus (Potchefstroom campus of the NWU) alienates other races. Through her story, her excellence in academics is demonstrated, and how proud she is to be part of the Potchefstroom community becomes evident in the post. In this video, the values of academic freedom and excellence in all endeavours are demonstrated. Furthermore, the story of Asanda Mkhize (30 January 2024) shares her academic journey, provides guidance on Mathematics and illustrates the significance of participating in social societies to foster a sense of belonging and purpose on the Potchefstroom campus. These stories are strategic, as they represent the NWU's intentional communication of its values and how stakeholders receive and symbolise what is presented to them.

In conclusion, the institution's goals and strategies play a big role in establishing the structure of institutional communication. This is done by making sure that the communication goals are in line with the NWU's vision, mission, and strategy. Additionally, it is important to utilise these platforms to reach relevant stakeholders and ensure that the institutional objectives of strategic communication using social media platforms are achieved. The NWU uses its social media platforms to communicate relevant stories and to convey its values to stakeholders. These goals and strategies play a fundamental role in establishing how the content is planned and delivered, ensuring that posts are relevant and reach various stakeholders. The posts analysed reflect the institution's commitment to the values of academic freedom, freedom of research, and excellence in its endeavours.

5.2.2 Stakeholder identification

Understanding different stakeholders is an important part of strategic communication management theory because it helps people interact in a meaningful way and aligns different stakeholders with the institution's values. In addition, social media platforms provide an opportunity for the institution to gain a better understanding of the preferences and interests of its stakeholders, thereby improving its ability to communicate effectively (see section 2.2.2). The operational definition (see Table 2.1) refers to stakeholder identification for identifying the NWU's stakeholders who are communicated with on social media platforms and to tailor messages according to their specific needs. The communication of values on social media platforms should be inclusive, ensuring that messages resonate with and represent the diversity of the NWU's stakeholder base. Furthermore, the NWU should recognise and understand the diverse groups that engage with and relate to the NWU's values on social media platforms. This involves

analysing stakeholders' perspectives, as reflected in their engagement and feedback on social media, to gain insight into how they interpret and apply these values.

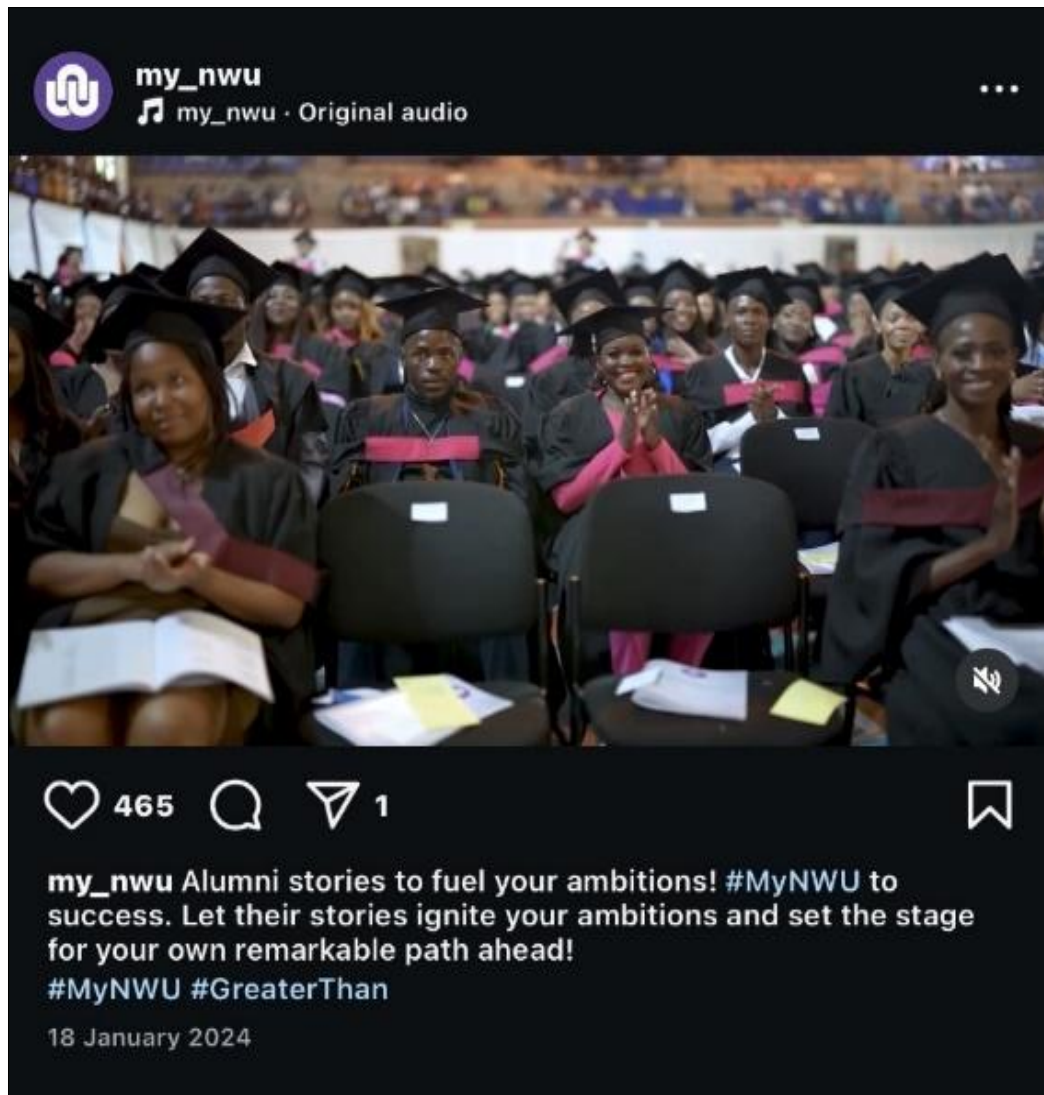


Figure 5.7: Alumni stories

The alumni testimonial video posted on 18 January 2024 reflects the diversity of the stakeholders, what they stand for, and how they want to be recognised. This aligns with NWU's motto, "It all starts here." The video shares a range of personal stories where students speak about their academic journey experience, while others reflect on the leadership roles and achievements in sport. As a result, the values of care and acceptance are shown symbolically, as individuals are given a chance to share their stories and encourage others to stay dedicated to their studies and

strive for success. In addition, this video opens a platform for engagement where viewers (different stakeholders) are given a chance to share their own experiences during their academic journey with NWU.



Figure 5.8: Employee Appreciation Day

In the post shared on 2 March 2024, the NWU showed appreciation for its diverse employees from various departments, roles, and diverse cultural backgrounds.

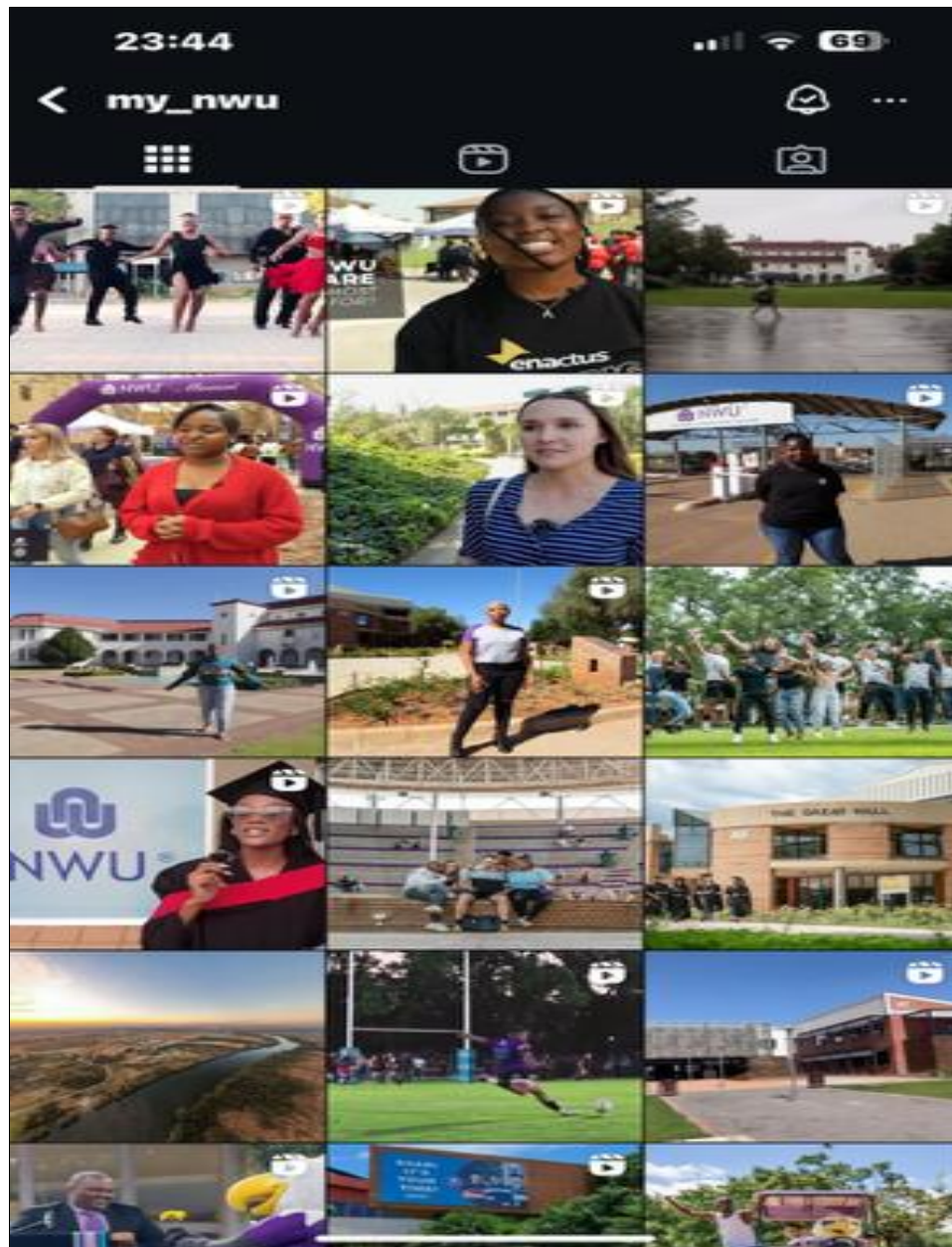


Figure 5.9: January pictorial

The post shared between 22-24 January shows the convergence of culture and education, showcasing how they work together to exchange information and engage various stakeholders. The video displays various aspects of university life, such as relaxation areas on campus, the uniqueness of the pride wall, which symbolises the inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community, and the lecture halls and library. Campus tours serve as a tool to share information amongst stakeholders, promoting the values of embracing diversity and transparency.

The posts above and below illustrate that the NWU uses social media to represent its diverse stakeholders and promote engagement through their diverse backgrounds and circumstances. Diverse stakeholders play a crucial role in reflecting the broad spectrum of the university community on social media platforms. By representing varied audiences, they help ensure that the communication of NWU's values is inclusive, relatable, and resonates across different groups.



Figure 5.10: Diversity pictorial

During the first few posts in February 2024, the NWU social media platform reflected the diverse cultures of students, ranging from local to international students. These posts communicated the integration of first-year students into higher learning, demonstrating their expression of excitement

and relief. In addition, NWU's core values (academic freedom and freedom of research) are represented by the university's diverse student body, who come from varied backgrounds with the shared goal of pursuing education and shaping their own career paths. The videos showcase a sense of belonging among different stakeholders at the NWU.

Furthermore, the university uses these platforms to communicate with stakeholders regarding various ways that it supports arts and sports through hosting events that promote cultural differences and recognise talent. Through these initiatives, the value of excellence in all endeavours is displayed, and students are empowered. Such efforts serve as a strategic communication tool that enhances the visibility of NWU's values across social media platforms.



Figure 5.11: Ramadan season

The NWU social media platforms also reflect the values of compassion and inclusiveness, as well as appreciating diversity, particularly in terms of religion. In the post shared on 11 March 2024, the institution took a further step by recognising Ramadan, exploring what this holy month means to those observing it in the Islamic religion, and also exploring the favourite meals eaten to break the fast. This is a true reflection of NWU's commitment to communicating its values across social media platforms to diverse stakeholders. This post further demonstrates that the institution cares for its diverse stakeholders by ensuring that the content of the post educates others about different religions.

In conclusion, diverse stakeholders are critical in representing the voices of a diverse audience, thereby strengthening communication about NWU's values and ensuring that these messages are received by all stakeholders. These stakeholders represent various cultures, religious backgrounds and sexual orientations. For example, one stakeholder group, such as current students at the institution, includes local and international students. The values affirm the essential role stakeholders play in promoting social cohesion and celebrating the diversity of the institution. It appears that the NWU's messages on social media platforms are specifically tailored to include diverse stakeholders, enabling meaningful social interaction and a deeper connection with the NWU values. The NWU understands the expectations and needs of various stakeholders and communicates on social media accordingly. This approach links with NWU's commitment to the value of embracing diversity and being caring and inclusive.

5.2.3 Social media platforms as strategic channels

Communication channels remain core mediums for conveying the NWU's values to stakeholders through designated platforms. These channels give an opportunity for engagement with stakeholders and generate meaningful connections within the designated platforms (see section 2.2.3). Strategic communication management theory emphasises the significance of the communication medium as an important channel for conveying institutional values and enhancing stakeholder engagement across various platforms (see section 2.2.5).

The operational definition (see Table 2.1) for social media platforms as strategic channels of communication refers to the deliberate selection and effective management of designated platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, to communicate the NWU's values. These platforms serve as essential media for crafting and sharing content where the NWU's values are clearly identifiable, enabling targeted and meaningful engagement with stakeholders. Strategic use of these channels enhances interaction and ensures that the communication of values is optimised

through the deliberate and effective selection of the correct social media channel for each message. The NWU uses social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to reach stakeholders through created content.

Strategic communication channels play a vital role in stakeholder engagement by ensuring that appropriate platforms are utilised to deliver key messages and content. For instance, NWU's Instagram and Facebook pages typically do not share identical content simultaneously, as each platform varies in speed and stakeholder interaction patterns, influencing when and where specific content is most effectively received. Recently, NWU shared a netball reel on Instagram and posted pictures on Facebook, reflecting how stakeholder preferences and the nature of each platform shape the type of content communicated. As a result, it is essential to use all available platforms for strategic communication, ensuring that each is carefully selected based on its significance. Furthermore, research should be conducted to better understand how different stakeholder groups interact with and consume value-driven content on various social media platforms. User engagement is enhanced when the right channels are used to convey the NWU's values to relevant stakeholders. Therefore, the institution must ensure that the content created is posted on the correct channel to reach the intended stakeholder group. For stakeholders to understand and engage on the selected platform, the message must be tailored and relevant. Channels have a significant impact on the NWU values that are communicated via social media platforms and encourage active engagement.

5.2.4 Purposive and intentional communication

According to the strategic communication management theory, purposive communication goes beyond exchanging ideas; it encourages an organisation to consider the fundamental purpose of its communication and the goals it aims to achieve. The content posted on social media should be in line with the aims and objectives of the organisation, which includes the strategic communication of institutional values to relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, it highlights the significance of ensuring that the message that carries the institutional values is not missing in translation (see section 2.2.4). The operational definition for purposive and intentional communication (see Table 2.1) refers to the consistent, deliberate and strategic use of social media platforms to convey the NWU's values in a manner that fully represents what the institution stands for. This entails creating and sharing content that purposefully and transparently integrates the NWU's values, ensuring that it aligns with the institution's vision and mission. Such communication is designed to reinforce the values on social media platforms.

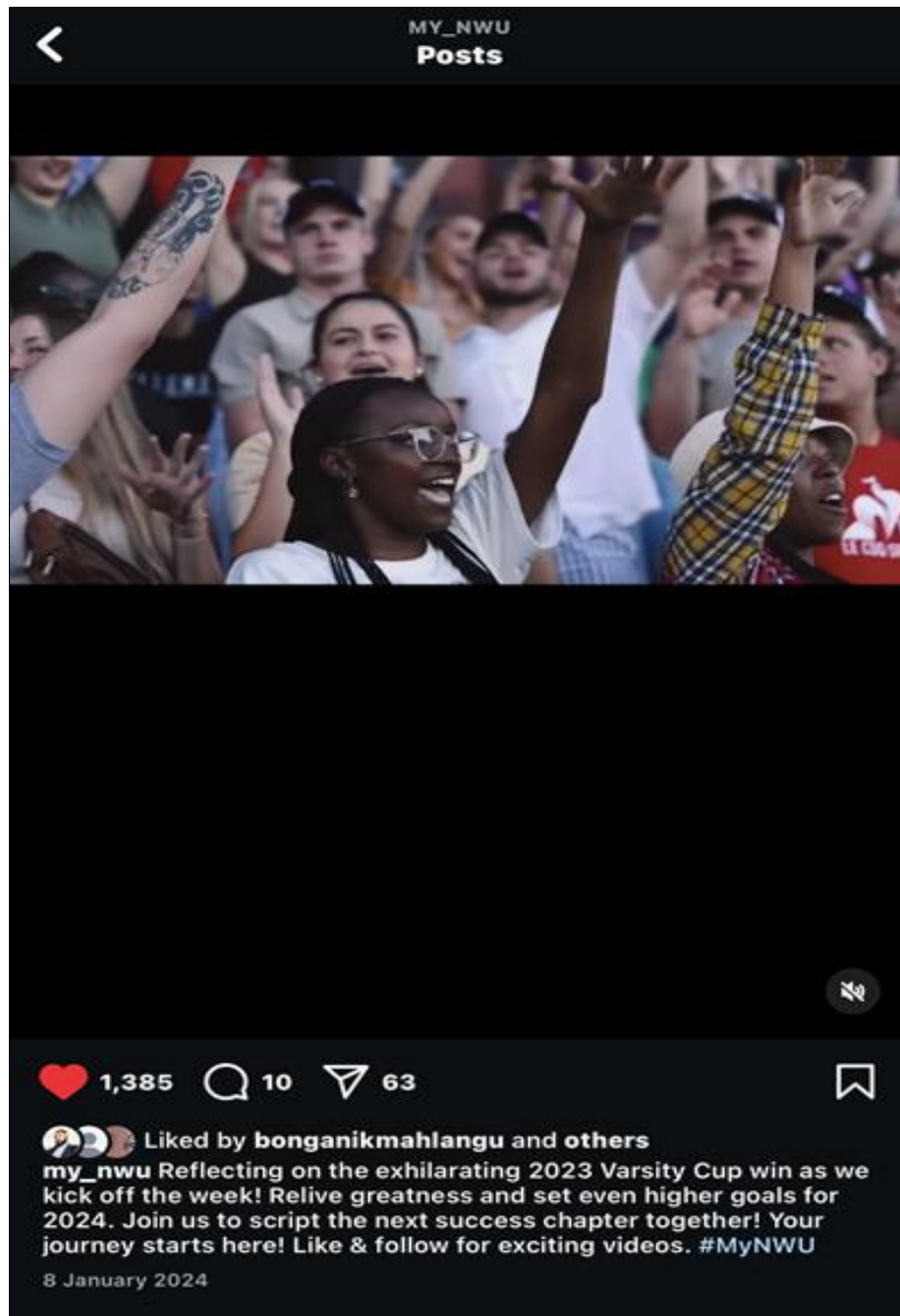


Figure 5.12: Varsity cup win

In one example, on 8 January 2024, the NWU posted a video reflecting on the university's achievements from the previous year (see Figure 5.12). The video highlighted the NWU Eagles' Varsity Cup victory, and as intended, this post evoked emotions among the audience. This video served as a reminder to students, staff, the general public and other stakeholders of the

achievements and values that the NWU is proud of. Therefore, the post reflects the institution's commitment to the values of embracing excellence in all endeavours. Through this type of sports content, where cultures and population groups are unified, the institution's values are enhanced across the internal and external stakeholder groups, thus integrating the value of diversity.



Figure 5.13: NWU Eagles win

The institution continuously communicates its accomplishments across various social media platforms. This demonstrates a deliberate effort to continuously and consistently post content about victories at the NWU. For example, on 26 February, the NWU Eagles celebrated a victory in a rugby match and by means of hashtags such as #NWUsports and #rugbyrocks, the institution conveyed a message of pride in its sporting achievements and its various stakeholders. These achievements reflect NWU's value of excellence in all endeavours.



Figure 5.14: Celebrating Greatness

Another example is the post that was released on March 18, 2024, in which a new student life song was written to commemorate 20 years of milestones and memories (see Figure 5.14). This post illustrates the institution's value of excellence in its endeavours, as it allows stakeholders to participate in recognising and celebrating the institution's achievements.

When interacting with stakeholders on social media, the messages of institutions like the NWU must be strategic and relevant, which is evident in the purposeful and deliberate content. In addition, purposive content ensures that messages are intentional and align with the institution's goals and values. Analysis of the posts above revealed that the institution purposively communicates its goal towards excellence. This approach aligns with NWU's commitment to the value of achieving excellence in its endeavours and reinforces the purpose of the posts in social media interactions with stakeholders.



Figure 5.15: Monthly highlights

Another example of the NWU intentionally sharing content on social media platforms to improve stakeholders' understanding of the values the institution embodies and upholds is the January 2024 post (Figure 5.15), in which social media practitioners displayed the institution's three campuses and emphasised the historical values held by each campus. It appears that the content was designed to assist stakeholders in understanding the symbolic value of elements. The three campuses' artefacts are reflected to convey their unique identities and historical relevance. For example, the Pukke-Amphitheatre is visually illustrated in the right-hand corner of the image to foster a sense of community and belonging among various cultural groups on the Potchefstroom campus.

In conclusion, the NWU seems to be intentional in creating content that directly conveys the institution's values to relevant stakeholders. In this way, it ensures that stakeholders are familiar with the core values of the institution. Furthermore, it can be deduced that the NWU's values are communicated intentionally and consistently across social media platforms to improve its visibility and impact. The success of every communication strategy lies in delivering core messages, which, in this case, are the NWU values that are communicated through social media platforms. The NWU should continue to refine its communication strategies to purposefully convey its values through social media platforms, as they are already doing.

5.2.5 Engagement on social media

According to strategic communication management theory, content regarding the NWU's values should be generated to encourage engagement and interactions with stakeholders on social media to draw them closer to the institution. Therefore, it is important that social media is used to create various posts that encourage active participation and enable meaningful interaction between stakeholders and the institution (see section 2.2.5). As illustrated in Table 2.1, engagement on social media refers to the creation and management of interactive content that fosters dialogue between the NWU and its stakeholders, with the NWU's values serving as the foundation for these interactions. This involves creating posts that encourage participation, invite feedback and promote conversation about the values. Strategic engagement ensures that interactions are more than "likes" on social media, but include comments, shares, interaction and co-creation of content that reflect the NWU's values in the public domain.



Figure 5.16: Orientation experience

The post above (Figure 5.16), published on the 16th of February 2024, reflects the NWU's commitment towards fostering two-way communication between stakeholders and the institution. In this instance, the post asks students to share their thoughts on the orientation day activities, which encourages dialogue. The snapshot of the video above also seems to promote the value of student diversity, which links to the value of inclusivity and caring.



Figure 5.17: Joy and happiness reflection

The content shared by the NWU on 20 March 2024 (figure 5.17) reflects what the institution stands for in terms of the well-being of students and staff. This aligns with NWU's values of caring and inclusiveness. The post aims to demonstrate that the institution not only communicates its values strategically but also presents opportunities for dialogue on social media platforms. For example, the video celebrating International Happiness Day allows staff members and students to share their thoughts on the content shared on social media platforms. This approach reflects how the institution tries to embrace the unique diversity of its stakeholders and their opinions on what defines their joy and happiness.

A small number of posts were available that actively communicate with stakeholders or promote meaningful dialogue. In most cases, the posts where two-way communication was encouraged to some extent were primarily used as a persuasive communication tool, rather than an engagement tool to foster dialogue and understanding. This could pose a threat to the relevant stakeholders' understanding of their significance.

According to Lutz and Hoffmann (2013), social media platforms should be structured in a manner that fosters two-way communication between stakeholders and the organisation, promoting a mutual understanding which can assist in enabling communication content that is stakeholder and organisation-oriented (see sections 2.2 & 2.3.1).

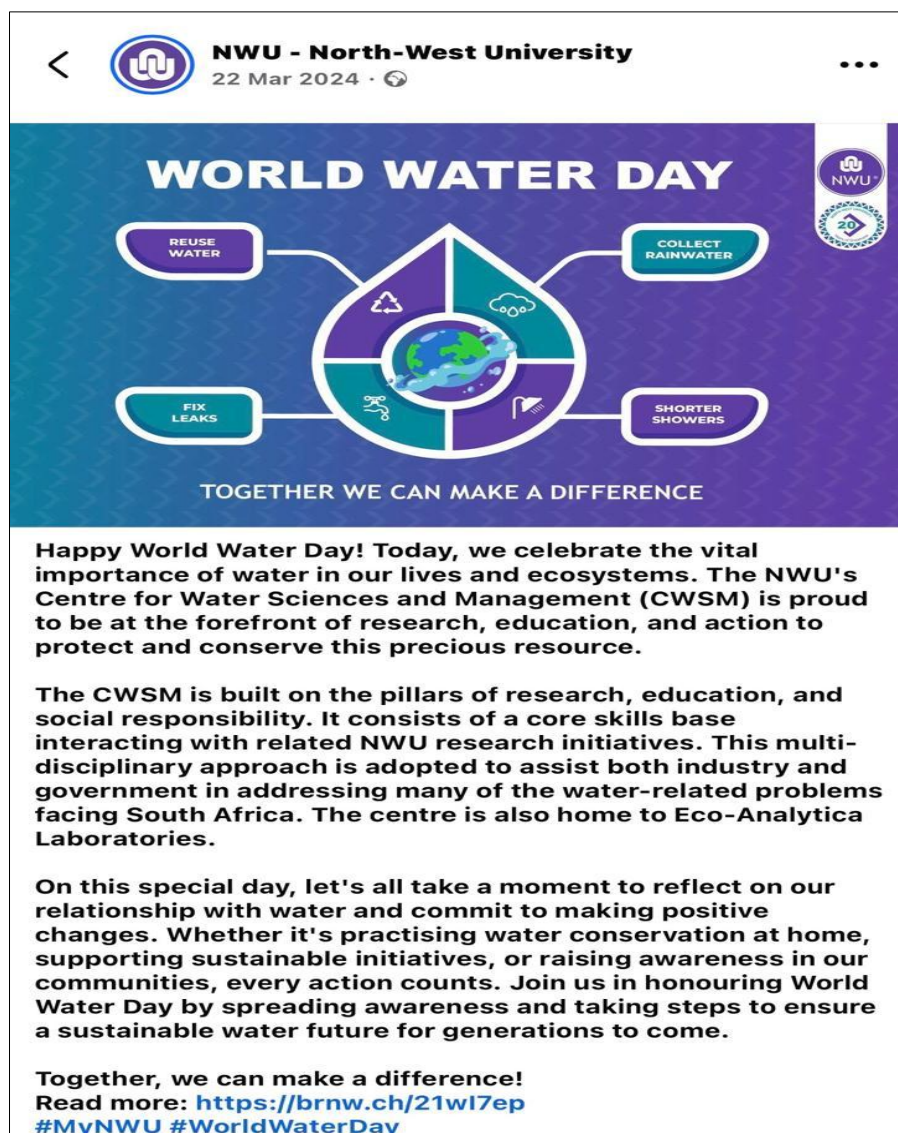


Figure 5.18: World Water Day

For example, it is unclear how the NWU's post about the theme of World Water Day (see Figure 5.18) applied to the institution's stakeholders or what type of dialogic responses the institution intended to receive from both internal and external stakeholders. The example above illustrates that the post generated minimal dialogic interaction. While the NWU aims to commemorate important international and national events in South Africa, not every post aligns with the interests of stakeholders or institutional values in a way that encourages engagement.

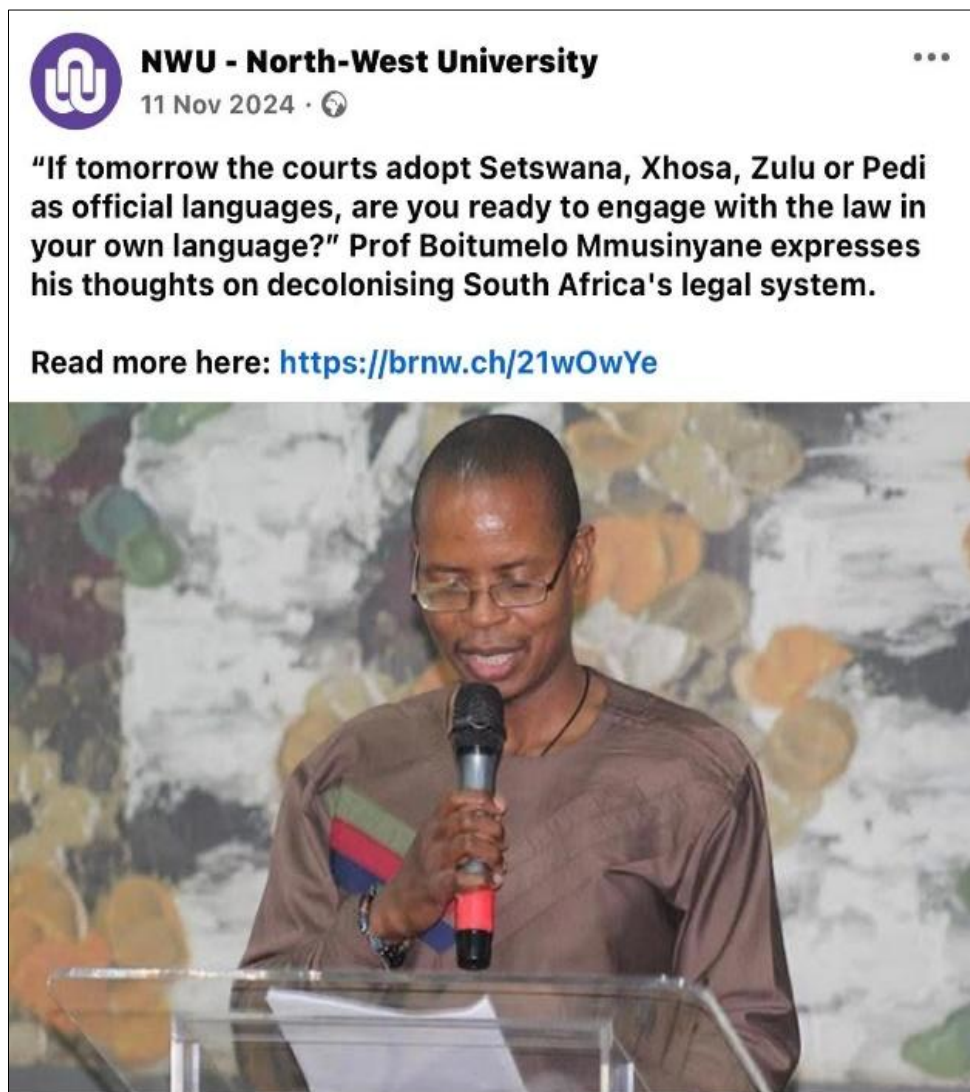


Figure 5.19: Interpretation of Law in native languages

In other posts, the element of dialogue is more evident, and as a result, the institutional values are reflected in the content posted on the platforms. For example, the post uploaded on the 11th

of November 2024 (Figure 5.19) mainly addressed issues regarding language. Stakeholders were invited to share their perspectives on their preparedness to engage with the law using their own language, which aligns directly with the values of caring and inclusivity, while on the other hand, cultivating diversity, a core value of the institution. Furthermore, the post demonstrates transparency with regard to the institution's point of view on decolonising South Africa's legal system and strategically offers an opportunity for dialogue by posing provocative questions.

For the NWU's values to make an impact, these values should be conveyed in a manner that permits stakeholders to interact and actively participate with the institution on social media platforms. Developing this interaction improves the strategic plans for effective communication on these platforms (see section 2.2.3).



Figure 5.20: Competition poster

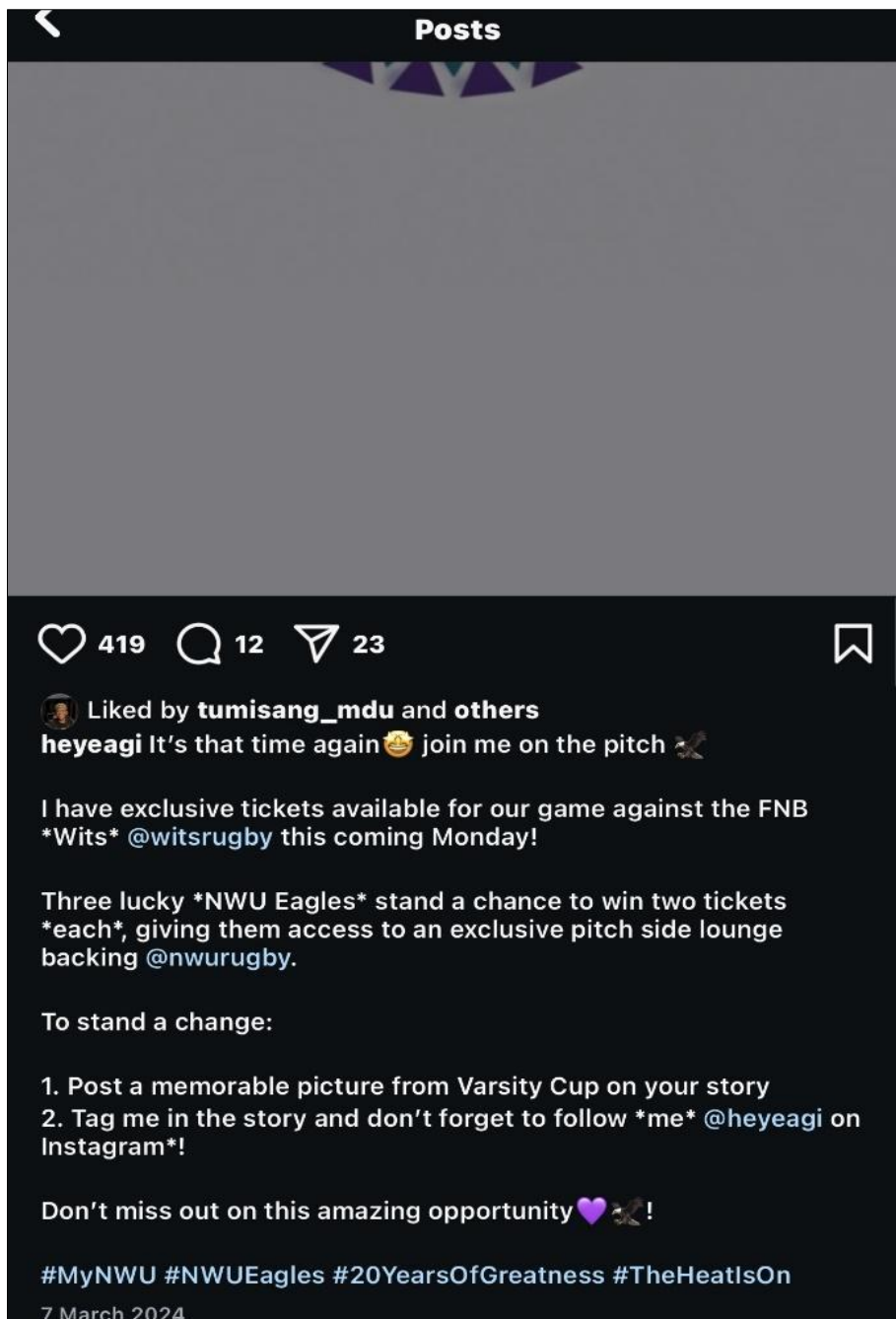


Figure 5.21: Exclusive rugby tickets

On 5 March 2024, the NWU shared a video announcing a competition where individuals could win a laptop by clicking the link in the institution's social media biography, liking their social media account, and sharing a memorable moment. This approach clearly indicates the university's efforts to enhance collaboration on its social media platforms by encouraging stakeholders to participate and share their experiences during orientation and interaction with other stakeholders.

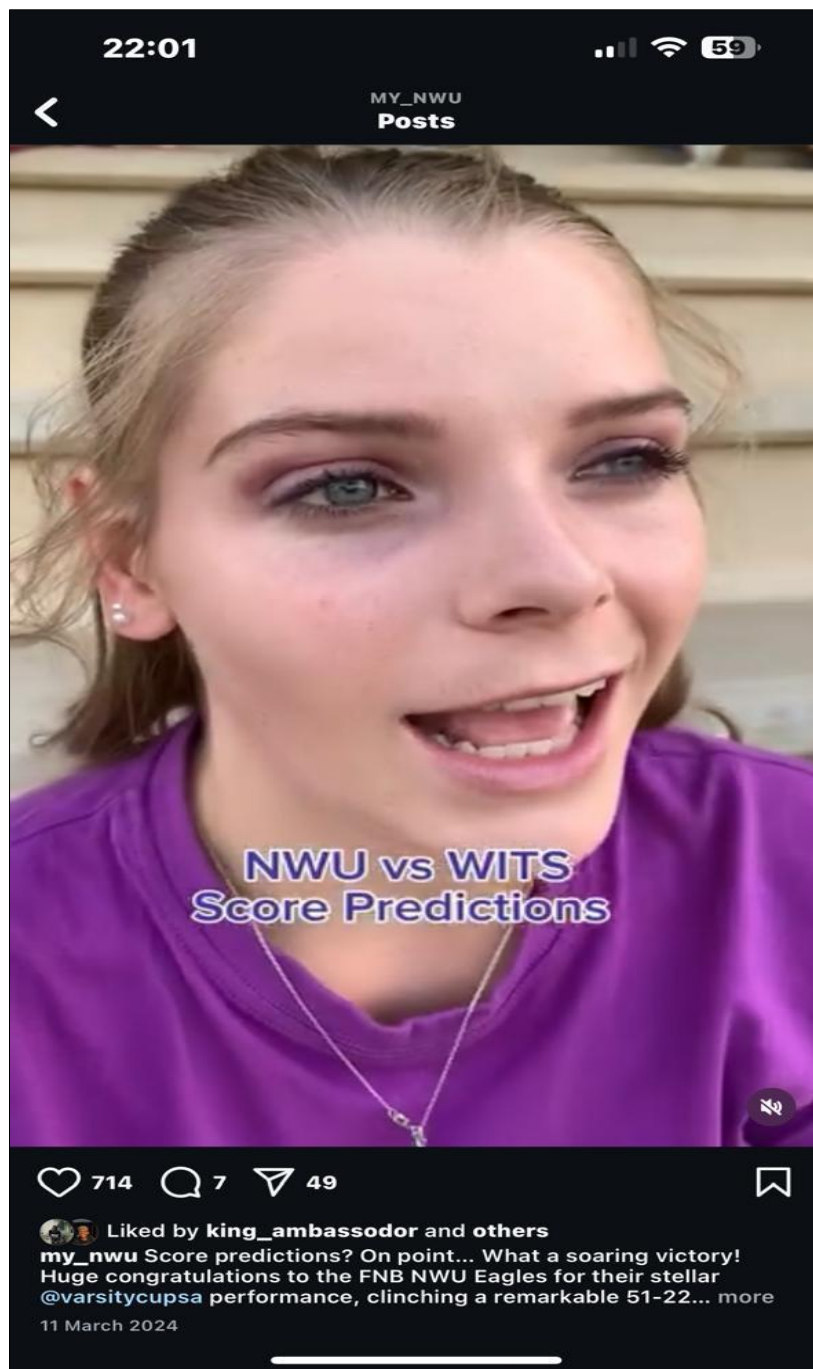


Figure 5.22: NWU vs Wits score prediction

Another example of a post where engagement is highlighted on the NWU's social media activity was the post on 11 March 2024, where the institution invited stakeholders to predict the scores of the upcoming varsity cup game featuring the NWU Eagles. The stakeholders actively participated in the content posted and shared their thoughts and predictions through the comment section. This type of interactive content enhances active participation and fosters a sense of

community between stakeholders. Furthermore, the post shared on 7 March 2024 emphasises interaction and participation, as it calls stakeholders to share their most memorable varsity cup photos on their personal Instagram stories. This approach supports the institution's commitment to foster two-way communication by encouraging stakeholders to actively interact with each other to reach the desired goal.

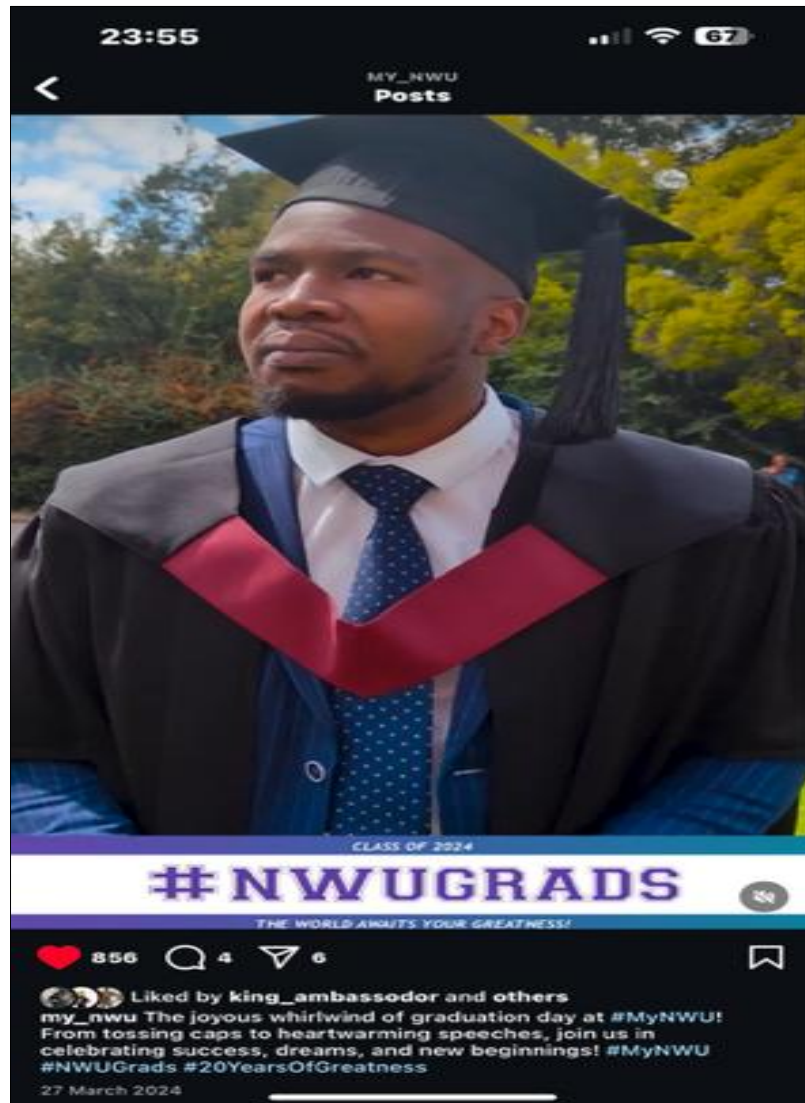


Figure 5.23: Alumni graduates

On 27 March 2024, the NWU embarked on its annual graduation posts, where students shared their aspiring stories and what the future holds for them. The posts highlighted various values that NWU stands for, including academic freedom and freedom of research and excellence in all

endeavours. These posts highlight the ability of students to excel in academics while envisioning a brighter future. The element of instant feedback was visible, as several stakeholders shared their past graduation memories in various ways, while others responded to questions such as “Where to from now?” and “What does this achievement mean to you?”.

The institution plays a fundamental role in receiving and responding to feedback from both its key stakeholders and prospective students. Therefore, one of its critical duties is to be responsive. While doing so, it must ensure that its actions represent the values of the organisation. However, NWU's social media platforms lack consistency in responsiveness, which is an area that requires improvement. This can be improved by regularly checking platforms and assigning social media practitioners to ensure meaningful and timely feedback.

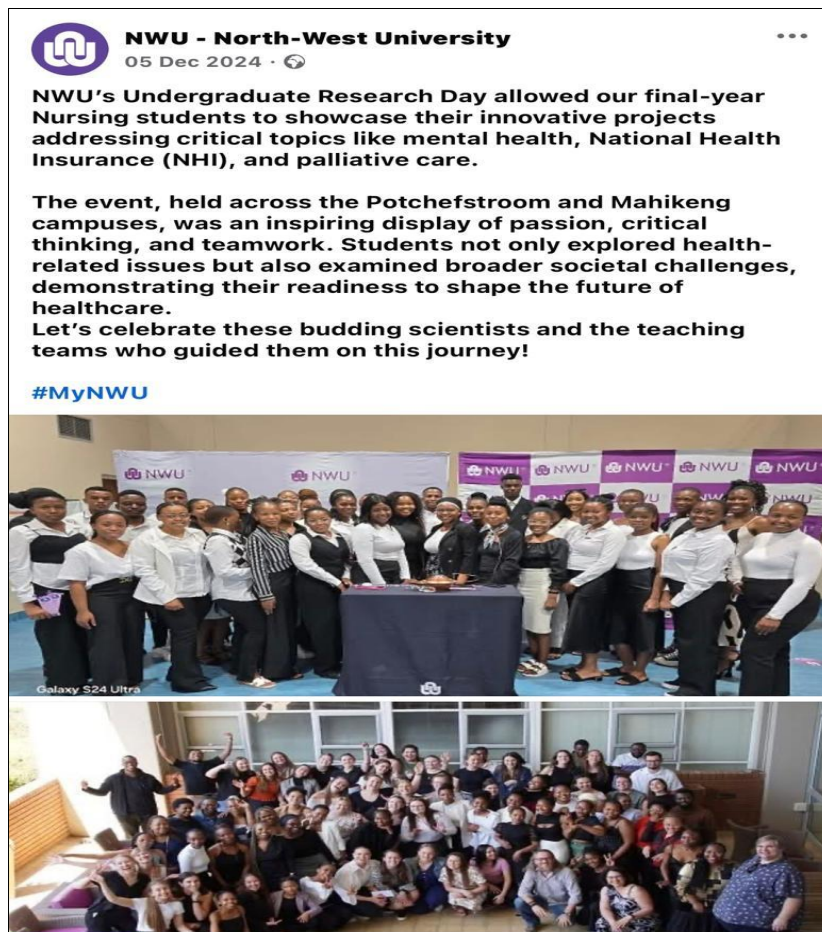


Figure 5.24: Undergraduate research day

Participation and interaction among stakeholders remain fundamental in creating a harmonious environment where individuals can learn, excel and display their skills. For example, the post in Figure 5.24 highlights the NWU Undergraduate Research Day, which promotes critical thinking and teamwork amongst nursing students. This event aims to ensure that students are well-equipped with the necessary skills to address healthcare issues and broader societal issues, which are aligned with the institutional value of academic freedom and freedom of research. In addition, by permitting students to explore various complex issues and implement innovative results, the NWU creates a conducive environment that promotes transparency, ethics and responsibility amongst scholars across various fields of study. This post fosters engagement with stakeholders in the online social media and offline face-to-face environment. Another example of combining online and offline “real-world” engagement is where the NWU participates in projects involving stakeholders directly and indirectly. This reflects its core value of caring and commitment to embracing diversity through the donation of clothes. These initiatives are aimed at improving the lives of those in need. This message encourages students and other stakeholders to make an impact in the lives of others and promote social cohesion in their daily interactions. Online posts lead to offline engagement and active involvement in these projects.

Engagement through participation and interaction highlights the importance of strategically communicating the NWU values to stakeholders using social media platforms. Such engagement allows the sharing of ideas and empowers both the university and stakeholders to maintain and promote the institutional values. This collaboration strengthens the NWU's brand image by encouraging stakeholders to contribute to the institution's vision and mission. As a result, active participation increases interest and creates dialogue on social media platforms, and, in doing so, it supports the strategic communication of values. Interactivity on social media fosters unity between the stakeholders and the institution, allowing them to speak in one voice across various social media platforms. The engagement highlighted in the examples provided in this chapter demonstrates the significance of social media engagement in enhancing the university's visibility and expressing the institution's commitment to stakeholder collaboration.

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the strategic management of social media platforms plays a vital role in advancing NWU's value-driven communication strategy by ensuring that all messaging is purposeful and consistently aligned with the university's institutional goals. Both the NWU and stakeholders must

be intentional in their engagement to enhance understanding of the other party's expectations and needs. Strategic communication highlights what the university stands for and how it wants the stakeholders to represent it as a partner in its vision and mission. This approach links with NWU's commitment to its values.

This chapter aimed to answer Specific Research Question 3, namely: *To what extent are the NWU values strategically communicated to stakeholders on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram?* In this chapter, it became evident that the NWU has demonstrated a significant impact on the usage of social media platforms to communicate the NWU values. The university has shown the impact of values through research innovation and ground-breaking discovery, and excellence in both academics and sports. In addition, the posts demonstrated inclusivity and diversity, which are core values that the institution upholds, by celebrating monumental milestones, giving stakeholders a voice, and providing an opportunity to inform and educate them. Furthermore, the social media platforms have used a variety of attractive content to express the NWU values and ensure interaction. The following chapter will include the conclusions, an answer to the general research question, provide suggestions for improving NWU's social media communication about its values, and recommendations for future research opportunities.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 provided the context of the study, the problem statement and the research questions which guided the study. Chapter 2 focused on the identified principles of the strategic communication management theory. Chapter 3 outlined the qualitative research approach, detailing the use of semi-structured interviews to gather data from NWU's Corporate Relations and Marketing department. It also described the application of qualitative content analysis to examine NWU's social media presence, with Instagram and Facebook purposively selected for review.

Chapter 4 presented the findings from semi-structured interviews, addressing specific research question 2, while Chapter 5 explored the results of the qualitative content analysis, providing insights in response to research question 3. This chapter presents the conclusions addressing the specific research questions, followed by a response to the overarching research question. Based on these insights, recommendations are proposed, the study's limitations are acknowledged, and directions for future research are outlined.

6.2 Research conclusions

In this section, the researcher formulates conclusions on the three specific research questions and summarises the findings from the literature study, semi-structured interviews, and qualitative content analysis.

6.2.1 Answering specific research question 1

What principles of the strategic communication management theory are applicable to communicate the NWU values to stakeholders through its social media platforms?

In Chapter 2, the guiding principles from the strategic communication management theory were identified and explained. These principles were identified to guide the study. A summary of the guiding principles applicable to this study was summarised in Table 2.1, with operational definitions to make the principles relevant to the context of the study. The operational definitions provide a guide for how the NWU values should be strategically communicated on its social media

pages. The table is presented here again for ease of reference and as an answer to specific research question 1.

Table 6.1: Theoretical guidelines for the study

Strategic communication management on social media	
Guiding principles	Operational definition for the context of this study
Alignment with institutional strategy	Alignment with institutional strategy refers to the strategic communication of the NWU's values on social media platforms in a manner that supports the institution's vision and mission and contributes to the realisation of its strategies. This entails consistently embedding the NWU's values within the core messages shared with stakeholders, ensuring that these values are clearly present, portrayed and reinforced in social media communication.
Stakeholder identification	Stakeholder identification refers to identifying the NWU's stakeholders who are communicated with on social media platforms, to tailor messages according to their specific needs. The communication of values on social media platforms should be inclusive, ensuring that messages resonate with and represent the diversity of the NWU's stakeholder base. Furthermore, the NWU should recognise and understand the diverse groups that engage with and relate to the NWU's values on social media platforms. This involves analysing stakeholders' perspectives, as reflected in their engagement and feedback on social media, to gain insight into how they interpret and apply these values.

Social media platforms as strategic channels	Social media platforms as strategic channels of communication refer to the deliberate selection and effective management of designated platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, to communicate the NWU's values. These platforms serve as essential media for crafting and sharing content where the NWU's values are clearly identifiable, enabling targeted and meaningful engagement with stakeholders. Strategic use of these channels enhances interaction and ensures that the communication of values is optimised through the deliberate and effective selection of the correct social media channel for each message.
Purposive and intentional communication	Purposive and intentional communication refers to the consistent, deliberate and strategic use of social media platforms to convey the NWU's values in a manner that fully represents what the institution stands for. This entails creating and sharing content that purposefully and transparently integrates the NWU's values, ensuring that it aligns with the institution's vision and mission. Such communication is designed to reinforce the values on social media platforms.
Engagement on social media	Engagement on social media refers to the creation and management of interactive content that fosters dialogue between the NWU and its stakeholders, with the NWU's values serving as the foundation for these interactions. This involves creating posts that encourage participation, invite feedback and promote conversation about the values. Strategic engagement ensures that interactions are more than "likes" on social media, but include comments, shares, interaction and co-creation of content that reflect the NWU's values in the public domain.

6.2.2 Answering specific research question 2

How does the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department perceive its management of social media platforms to strategically communicate the NWU's values to stakeholders?

6.2.2.1 Alignment with institutional strategy

The institutional strategy must be effectively communicated and aligned with the social media platforms used by the institution's practitioners to convey the NWU's values. This alignment is achieved by highlighting these values through communication tailored to stakeholder engagement. The values are embedded in institutional texts and reinforced through social media messaging. Participants affirmed that the goals and strategies guiding communication are informed by the communication audit, which enhances the institutional strategy by ensuring alignment with the NWU's values when engaging stakeholders.

Findings from the semi-structured interviews revealed that goals and strategies extend beyond sharing stories that resonate with the NWU's values. They also involve continually adapting to stakeholders' views and understanding the behavioural patterns of content consumers. Participants indicated that the NWU's social media goals and strategies are developed with the audience in mind, ensuring that content is engaging and relevant. Consequently, these goals are realised when communication is transparent and responsive to stakeholder preferences.

The Corporate Relations and Marketing Department of the NWU plays a central role in strategically communicating the university's values by identifying the goals and objectives it aims to achieve through social media engagement. Participants further asserted that purposeful communication is achieved by using relevant and designated social media platforms to convey the NWU's values and foster meaningful engagement. They also argued that strategic communication encompasses more than surface-level messaging. It involves identifying key issues and addressing them in ways that enhance the effectiveness of communicating the NWU's values to stakeholders across various social media platforms. It is therefore essential that the NWU ensures that its communication of values on social media platforms remains aligned with its broader institutional strategy. From the participants' perspectives, social media communication should not only be viewed as a means of engaging stakeholders but also as a way to highlight the significance of the NWU's values within its online presence. This approach encourages stakeholders to identify with these values and actively participate in value-based dialogue.

Participants believed that the NWU's goals and strategies are attainable through the use of social media platforms to advance its institutional mandate. However, stakeholders' roles extend beyond simply sharing stories that reflect the NWU's values. They also involve demonstrating how these values influence their lives and communities, particularly by promoting transparency and authenticity through social media communication. Participants also emphasised the ongoing need

for the strategic communication of NWU values across social media platforms. To achieve this effectively, practitioners must possess a thorough understanding of the values and their significance in institutional communication. Effective management of social media platforms, in turn, enables purposeful and sustained communication, positioning these platforms as vital tools for dialogue between the institution and its stakeholders.

6.2.2.2 Stakeholder identification

Stakeholder identification refers to the ability to recognise the individuals or groups with whom the institution communicates, and to assume responsibility for crafting tailored messages that address their specific needs through social media platforms. Therefore, messages reflecting the NWU's values must ensure resonance with stakeholders and inclusivity across diverse groups that align with these values. To address the needs of diverse audiences effectively, the institution must engage stakeholders through active interaction and feedback on social media platforms. This approach will enable the NWU to engage strategically with various groups by interpreting and applying its values consistently in online communication.

Participants highlighted that various factors influence stakeholders' perceptions, and measures should be implemented to ensure that the university's values are communicated strategically on Instagram and Facebook. One participant noted that stakeholders' perceptions shape the understanding of values, while others emphasised that multiple indicators affect how content is portrayed on these platforms. Stakeholder perspectives can also be better understood through surveys and response analyses, which rely on tools and indicators that measure stakeholders' engagement and perceptions. The institution employs analytics to interpret stakeholders' positive and negative reactions to communicated content. Social media platforms thus provide opportunities for stakeholders to express their understanding of the NWU's values and to engage with them meaningfully. Stakeholder participation is essential, as it supports the development of diverse, value-driven content that reflects the needs of different stakeholder groups. These platforms should also serve as channels for educating, informing, influencing and shaping the perceptions that the NWU aims to cultivate. The manner in which communication is managed will position the NWU to convey its values strategically through the designated platforms.

Participants recognised the role of diverse stakeholders in effectively communicating the NWU's values and achieving institutional objectives. Social media platforms are instrumental in deepening stakeholders' understanding of how they can contribute to society through engagement. The communication audit, in turn, amplifies the voices of diverse stakeholders and

identifies strategies to help them continuously use their voices to reinforce the NWU's message and strengthen institutional relationships. It is important to understand the roles and positions of stakeholders in relation to the NWU to determine how they can best contribute to promoting the university's values. This understanding supports the development of effective communication strategies for internal and external stakeholders. Diverse stakeholders serve as ambassadors of the NWU's values, playing an important role in the creation and transmission of content. However, participants expressed concern that the communication audit did not extend to broader stakeholder groups, which could, for example, affect how the university meets the communication needs and expectations of prospective students.

The communication of NWU's values on social media represents the perceptions of shared values held by participants in the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department, as well as the NWU stakeholders' perceptions. This process is significant, as it draws on their experiences to enrich the content being conveyed. Participants also noted that maintaining consistent communication with diverse stakeholders fosters engagement and encourages prospective stakeholders to align themselves with the NWU. Consequently, participants' views demonstrate an understanding of the importance of raising awareness of the NWU's values among diverse stakeholder groups across social media channels.

6.2.2.3 Social media platforms as strategic channels

Social media platforms function as strategic communication channels that are deliberately selected and managed to convey the NWU's institutional values. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram play an important role in crafting and conveying content that engages stakeholders and fosters an understanding of the institutional values. The strategic utilisation of such platforms facilitates interaction between stakeholders and the institution, thereby reinforcing the importance of selecting appropriate and contextually relevant channels for each message communicated.

Participants agreed that Facebook and Instagram are the most suitable social media platforms for engaging with stakeholders. The distinctive benefits of these platforms, combined with their capacity for diverse content formats, enable the effective communication of the NWU's values in multiple forms. Content creation is guided by the preferences of different stakeholder groups, particularly regarding their familiarity with, and inclination towards, particular platforms. Furthermore, participants observed that the selection of platforms is often influenced by the intended audience and the timing of communication. For example, internal stakeholders are typically reached through eFundi and digital staff publications, whereas broader audiences are

addressed through external-facing social media platforms. Some participants further emphasised that all institutional communication channels should operate in an integrated manner to ensure that content consistently reflects the NWU's values and addresses the expectations of identified stakeholder groups.

As indicated earlier, all NWU communication platforms are instrumental in conveying institutional values. The Corporate Relations and Marketing Department adopts a content-driven approach that prioritises the expression of these values across digital platforms. Posts, images and video reels are designed to reflect the NWU's values, enabling stakeholders to identify with and relate to the narratives presented. This process strengthens stakeholder engagement and also encourages active participation.

The identification of appropriate social media channels is important for the development of effective content strategies, as it aligns with the principle that social media should function as a purposeful and strategic tool for communication. These platforms serve as intentional spaces for communicating and reinforcing institutional principles, as well as vehicles for conveying information. The Corporate Relations and Marketing Department plays a central role in managing these platforms to ensure that messages are strategically constructed, in line with the NWU values, and directed towards specific stakeholder audiences.

The department determines and validates the suitability of each platform for its intended communicative purpose before conveying information. Participants believed that messages created for various social media platforms consistently represent the NWU's values and remain responsive to stakeholder needs. Although the underlying message remains constant across channels, the tone, format and stylistic features of the communication are adapted to align with the characteristics and expectations of each social media platform's audience.

6.2.2.4 Purposive and intended communication

The NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing Department believes that it adopts a deliberate, consistent and strategic approach to the use of social media platforms in conveying communication aligned with the university's values. This purposive communication reflects the institution's identity and reinforces what the NWU stands for. Every communication message disseminated across social media platforms is designed to strengthen the representation of institutional values, ensuring that content remains purposeful and aligned with the university's broader vision and mission.

Participants agreed that purposive communication is guided by clearly defined objectives that inform engagement across social media platforms. One participant observed that stories featuring individual stakeholders play a crucial role in illustrating and reinforcing the NWU's values. Content shared on these platforms frequently focuses on individuals whose experiences and achievements align with the university's ethos. Furthermore, participants recommended that communication should not only act as an informational tool, but also foster resonance with the NWU's values. This can be achieved through the creation of value-driven content, particularly stories that feature alumni who exemplify the NWU's values and continue to thrive beyond the institutional context.

The participants explained that stories that reflect the NWU's values are conveyed across various social media platforms and in different formats, including written articles that are strategically distributed through designated channels. Such narratives capture the essence of how institutional values are expressed and manifested. They highlight human stories of perseverance, innovation and academic achievement, thereby reflecting key values such as transparency, excellence and academic freedom. The NWU's approach to content creation, therefore, functions as a form of value communication, illustrating what the university represents. Every story communicated through these platforms contributes to the articulation and reinforcement of the NWU's values.

Purposeful and intentional communication on Facebook and Instagram serves as a means of showcasing narratives that reflect and celebrate the NWU's values, while emphasising the positive outcomes these values generate for both stakeholders and the institution. The co-creation of stories and content between stakeholders and the NWU is central to aligning communication with the university's values and fostering engagement. Participants further emphasised that purposeful communication is achieved through consistent and deliberate interaction, rather than the sporadic sharing of individual stories.

In addition, the strategic use of hashtags was identified as a mechanism for making communication purposeful and enhancing its visibility on social media platforms. Hashtags serve as vehicles for embedding the NWU's values within social media discourse and extend opportunities for stakeholders to participate actively. By engaging with these hashtags, stakeholders are encouraged to express their perspectives and share reflections on how they identify with the values represented in the university's communications.

6.2.2.5 Engagement on social media

Engagement on social media refers to the creation and management of interactive content that fosters dialogue between the NWU and its stakeholders, with the NWU's values as the foundation for these interactions. Equally important, engagement on platforms is seen through participation, promoting feedback and conversation between stakeholders and the institution, for example, comments, sharing, reposting and co-creation of the content that reflects NWU values through engagement on Facebook and Instagram.

The participants believe that their content creation fosters engagement, as reflected in the dialogue, participation and feedback generated from shared posts. This process also stimulates interest among stakeholders and the institution, creating meaningful interaction that contributes to engagement on social media platforms, thereby reflecting the values of the NWU. Conversely, participants contend that storytelling, through narratives and stakeholder engagement with communicated messages, forms the foundation of engagement on the NWU's Facebook and Instagram pages. They further emphasise that stories or content must inform and educate in ways that express the institution's values and cultivate a shared understanding between stakeholders and the NWU.

Effective management of social media platforms to enhance engagement between stakeholders and the institution requires engaging content, timely responses, and feedback. The institution's prompt reaction to posts and issues affecting stakeholders demonstrates the university's commitment to values such as care and responsiveness. Moreover, stakeholder interaction and participation in response to communicated content assist the department in improving its communication strategies. These shared experiences contribute to the institution's ability to embody and communicate its values within the public sphere, while the feedback received is integrated into the institution's communication tools and practices.

The NWU should also enable stakeholders to share experiences that resonate with institutional values and help them connect with the content communicated through stories and shared narratives. Such practices foster engagement on social media platforms. Furthermore, storytelling can be strategically employed to promote participation and interaction between stakeholders and the NWU. Participants agree that social media platforms should serve as spaces for exchanging ideas, collaborating, and sharing insights related to the NWU's values. For instance, these values are demonstrated when communication practitioners respond to queries on designated platforms with empathy and care. Consequently, participation and interaction should continually be encouraged on these platforms, as they play an important role in communicating the values of the NWU.

6.2.3 Answering specific research question 3

To what extent are the NWU values strategically communicated to stakeholders on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram?

6.2.3.1 Alignment with institutional strategy

The strategy followed to create content and communicate values on the NWU's social media pages aligns with the institutional strategy, emphasising the importance of strategic communication in achieving desired goals and objectives that reflect the institution's values across all social media platforms. The findings affirm that the strategic use of these platforms contributes to the attainment of institutional goals and ensures that communication effectively conveys the values the institution upholds. Moreover, social media platforms serve as vehicles for promoting the core message of these values, as they are integrated into the broader institutional strategy and communicated consistently to stakeholders. The NWU also uses these platforms to convey information and represent the diversity of its stakeholders in areas such as sport, culture, religion and race.

The NWU's 20th anniversary documentary, shared on its social media platforms, includes one of the university's core mandates: to take responsibility for ongoing social responsiveness and community engagement. This demonstrates how NWU employs social media to raise awareness of its institutional values and their societal impact, aligning posts with the university's vision, mission and strategic objectives. Furthermore, the institution's values are consistently reflected through written content on social media, assisting stakeholders in understanding its core goals and strategic direction. The unitary model underpinning the NWU advocates unity, excellence, and inclusivity, which are principles that are embedded throughout its social media presence.

Images shared on the NWU's social media platforms also embody these values. For example, posts featuring the Mahikeng Campus depict a space where institutional values are actively lived out and achieved. Such imagery illustrates the role the institution plays in enriching the lives of stakeholders and engaging them in projects that align with its values. Posts highlighting groundbreaking research and achievements further reflect the university's commitment to the value of excellence, positioning the institution as a globally competitive academic entity. In addition, students' shared stories of success help shape positive perceptions and embody the principles of academic freedom and excellence in all endeavours.

Through the strategic management of its social media platforms, the institution effectively reaches relevant stakeholders and ensures that its communication objectives are met. These platforms also serve as channels through which meaningful stories are shared and institutional values are conveyed. Consequently, posts on Facebook and Instagram reflect the NWU's commitment to the values of academic freedom, research excellence and integrity in all its undertakings.

6.2.3.2 Stakeholder identification

The strategic communication management theory emphasises that understanding diverse stakeholder groups enables interaction and alignment between stakeholders and institutional values. This understanding of stakeholders allows the institution to identify stakeholders' preferences and to develop more effective communication approaches. The findings of this study indicate that the communication of values on social media platforms should be inclusive, ensuring that messages resonate with and reflect the diversity of the NWU's stakeholder base. Moreover, these values should acknowledge the variety of groups that engage with and relate to the NWU's values across social media platforms. Analysing stakeholders' perspectives is therefore essential, as it provides insight into how they perceive, internalise and apply the institution's values within their own contexts.

The qualitative content analysis of the Facebook and Instagram pages shows that the NWU has demonstrated a representation of its diverse stakeholder community through its social media communication, consistent with the institutional slogan, "It all starts here". The values of care and inclusivity are visible in the shared posts, which often portray the resilience of individuals who share their personal stories and inspire others to persevere. These narratives, frequently presented through videos, invite dialogue and participation by allowing viewers to contribute their own experiences of the academic journey at the NWU. Diversity is reflected across the institution's content, showcasing stories of inclusivity among LGBTQIA+ communities, students of various racial and cultural backgrounds, and international students. Through these efforts, stakeholders themselves play a crucial role in representing and embodying diversity when engaging with and communicating the NWU's values across different platforms.

Social media platforms are further employed to communicate the institution's support for the arts and sports, for example, through events that promote cultural understanding and recognise individual talent. Such activities demonstrate how the NWU's values empower stakeholders to enact and live out these principles. The university's commitment to communicating its values inclusively is also evident in posts that acknowledge diverse religious practices, such as

Ramadan. These gestures reinforce the university's dedication to fostering mutual respect and understanding among its stakeholder community. Diverse stakeholders thus play a vital role in representing multiple voices.

In conclusion, the NWU's communication of its values shows the role of stakeholders in promoting social cohesion and celebrating institutional diversity. The use of designated social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, enables the inclusion of varied stakeholder groups and the tailoring of messages to specific audiences. By embracing diversity and maintaining a commitment to the values of care and inclusivity, the NWU uses social media as a strategic tool to strengthen its relationships with stakeholders and to advance the communication of its institutional values.

6.2.3.3 Social media platforms as strategic communication

The qualitative content analysis reveals that the NWU employs its social media platforms to purposefully communicate the NWU's values to stakeholders through these strategically managed channels that facilitate engagement and connection between stakeholders and the institution. These platforms provide opportunities for dialogue and interaction, fostering mutual understanding. Therefore, Facebook and Instagram act as channels to convey institutional values and are used to increase stakeholder engagement and interaction.

The strategic communication of the NWU's values across social media platforms represents a deliberate and managed process aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of institutional communication. These platforms are integral to the creation and distribution of content that aligns with the NWU's core values and is strategically positioned to reach targeted audiences (stakeholders). The findings of this study, through the qualitative content analysis, suggest that stakeholder engagement is enhanced when appropriate and well-managed communication channels are employed to convey the NWU's values to relevant stakeholders. Consequently, the institution should remain intentional when creating and posting content on its Facebook and Instagram pages.

Moreover, messages are tailored to suit the specific audiences of each platform, ensuring that stakeholders can understand and engage with the content. By doing so, the institution promotes active participation and reinforces the NWU's values as communicated through its social media presence. The strategic and purposeful use of these platforms thus contributes to effective communication and the cultivation of a participatory digital community, based on its values.

6.2.3.4 Purposive and intentional communication

The NWU's communication efforts appear to be intentionally designed to highlight the institution's vision and mission, with a particular focus on promoting its core values. To this end, content posted via social media platforms is crafted to be purposeful. Purposive and intentional communication entails the deliberate, consistent and strategic use of social media to convey institutional values to diverse stakeholder groups in a manner that represents what the university stands for. The content shared must therefore be purposeful, integrating the institution's values in ways that reinforce and make them visible to stakeholders.

The content posted on the NWU's social media platforms reflects the university's ongoing commitment to the value of excellence in all endeavours. Furthermore, these values are reinforced among internal and external stakeholder groups, demonstrating the institution's dedication to diversity, particularly within areas such as sport. The use of hashtags serves as a form of digital storytelling, enabling the university to celebrate achievements and communicate accomplishments in a manner that conveys pride and collective identity. Through these narratives, the NWU expresses the value of excellence while fostering a sense of belonging and recognition among its stakeholders.

Posts on the institution's Facebook and Instagram pages also illustrate the participation of stakeholders in acknowledging and celebrating the university's achievements. The consistent and intentional communication of NWU's values across its social media presence enhances the visibility and impact of these values. Consequently, the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department must ensure that all content posted on these platforms aligns with the institution's values and contributes to strengthening its strategic message.

6.2.3.5 Engagement on social media

The construct of engagement on social media platforms centres on fostering meaningful interaction between stakeholders and the institution, thereby strengthening their connection and enhancing how they contribute to the visibility and promotion of the NWU's values across designated platforms. The findings from the qualitative content analysis of Facebook and Instagram suggest that consistent posting of engaging content encourages active participation, which in turn facilitates two-way communication between stakeholders and the NWU. Such interaction also ensures that the NWU's values are continuously shared within its digital environment. Moreover, the university's communication practices extend beyond the posting of

stories that merely resonate with stakeholders but also offer opportunities for dialogue through these platforms.

However, the findings reveal that relatively few posts directly engage stakeholders in ways that promote dialogue or participation. In such cases, the posts appear to function as persuasive communication tools rather than as mechanisms for genuine engagement and understanding. Additionally, not all commemorative posts produced by the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department reflect stakeholder interests or institutional values in ways that encourage interaction. In other instances, within the context of the engagement principle, the institution may use proactive questioning strategies to generate debate and invite stakeholder comments. Such practices enable stakeholders to engage with the content.

The NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department must receive and respond to feedback from current and prospective stakeholders. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that the NWU's responsiveness on social media is not always consistent, suggesting the need for the allocation of additional communication practitioners to ensure timely and meaningful feedback. Interactivity on social media platforms should strengthen unity and enhance the visibility of the NWU values.

6.3 Answering the general research question

How are social media platforms managed by the NWU to strategically communicate its values to stakeholders?

The semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis illustrated that the identification of stakeholders has enhanced how the NWU communicates its values, as the institution uses both Facebook and Instagram as platforms to convey content and foster an understanding of the values among its stakeholders. However, this approach may also limit the identification of new stakeholders, as communication efforts tend to focus on existing audiences rather than prospective ones. While the platforms engage immediate stakeholders by crafting articles and designing content that emphasise the positive aspects of the NWU's values, engagement also requires acknowledging how people interpret, question or even misunderstand these values.

Although the institution's communication is intentional and purposive, the management of social media platforms sometimes lacks responsiveness to comments and questions, which could hinder two-way communication. Moreover, engagement on these platforms has not fully evolved into an effective tool for relationship-building. Instead, content is sometimes used to persuade. As strategic communication channels, Facebook and Instagram should not only project shared

values but also strengthen stakeholders' association with the NWU. Consequently, these platforms should serve as communication tools to build and maintain long-term relationships through the consistent and strategic exchange of shared perspectives, embodying the NWU values.

Communication channels, such as social media platforms in general, should not function only as information distribution tools but as channels that facilitate two-way communication between the institution and its stakeholders. Such interaction provides opportunities for participants to co-construct meaning and collectively define institutional values. Moreover, engagement on social media should be a continuous and deliberate process which embodies the institutional values.

The NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department believes that its communication on Facebook and Instagram reflects stakeholder perspectives. Furthermore, they employ various strategies, such as the use of hashtags, to encourage stakeholder participation. Consistent and deliberate highlighting of stakeholder voices in content demonstrates the institution's commitment to grounding its values in shared principles. These strategies allow stakeholders to share their experiences and reinforce the values underpinning the university's identity. However, for communication to be effective, content must be tailored to the specific features and audiences of each platform to ensure relevance and engagement. The NWU's use of visually appealing and relatable content has helped convey its values, yet greater depth is needed to foster genuine understanding. The tone and style of content often express institutional rather than stakeholder values, resulting in one-sided narratives that could fail to acknowledge the full complexity of success stories.

Despite the limitations of using social media platforms to communicate values strategically, the NWU has made notable progress in promoting its institutional values. However, there is still room for improvement, particularly in amplifying stakeholder voices. Efforts to enhance the university's values without ensuring that stakeholders are heard could risk confining these values to familiar audiences only. Therefore, stakeholder collaboration should remain central to every campaign. Furthermore, linguistic inclusion should not be overlooked because language influences how values are perceived. A diverse and contextually sensitive approach to language use can make the NWU's values more visible and more relevant to the daily experiences of internal and external stakeholders.

6.4 Suggestions for the NWU to strategically communicate its values on social media

According to Ezeudo's (2024) research, social media has transformed language use by serving as a platform for information sharing and by incorporating hashtags as a form of discourse practice. Ezeudo (2024) emphasises that social media offers valuable opportunities for language learning and exposure to a wide range of linguistic variations. This suggests that the institution should improve its language usage in social media content. As the NWU has officially recognised multiple languages, these should also be incorporated into its online communication. Doing so would accommodate stakeholders who may not feel comfortable engaging in a single language, thereby enhancing the value of inclusivity and resonance among diverse stakeholders. The institution should maintain transparency through its communication audit reports. Stakeholders should be able to access, interrogate and contribute to these reports, ensuring that content remains meaningful and participatory.

Hansjee (2021:6) observes that although many organisations are active on social media, they do not always use the available features effectively to foster genuine engagement with stakeholders. The following is therefore recommended: Firstly, the NWU should implement more educational campaigns to familiarise stakeholders with its values. Secondly, in doing so, the institution should ensure that stakeholders' voices are clearly heard, meaningfully represented and central to the dialogue surrounding these values. Thirdly, the NWU should not equate engagement with visible reactions, such as likes, shares or comments alone, but should seek a deeper understanding of stakeholder perspectives to help shape a shared interpretation of NWU's values as strategically communicated on Facebook and Instagram. Finally, the institution should feature narratives that reflect the value of research freedom and highlight the contributions of the social sciences further. For instance, current stories often focus only on final achievements rather than the challenges and experiences encountered along the way. Showcasing these journeys could inspire stakeholders and encourage more authentic engagement with the institution's values, even in the face of difficult circumstances and challenges.

6.5 Limitations of this study

The study was constrained by the scale of participant involvement in the semi-structured interviews. Each participant at the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department holds a significant role within the department, and unfortunately, not all participants at the department were available to share their perceptions. This lack of diverse perspectives may have constrained

the study's broader insight into how management and practitioners experience and navigate the communication of NWU's values on social media platforms.

Furthermore, as the study focused on a single institution as a case study, its findings cannot be generalised to other universities in South Africa or globally. Consequently, these contextual limitations may affect the broader applicability of insights regarding the significance of social media platforms in strategically communicating institutional values to stakeholders. It is, however, important to note that the qualitative nature of this study was not intended to produce generalisable findings, but rather to provide in-depth insights into how the NWU communicates its values on social media.

The study was further limited by its focus on only two platforms, namely Instagram and Facebook. Other widely used platforms, such as TikTok and LinkedIn, were not included. Their inclusion could have enriched the findings, as some stakeholders may prefer engaging with NWU content on these alternative platforms, thereby offering additional perspectives on the communication and reception of institutional values.

6.6 Recommendations for future research

Further studies could adopt a broader scope by including multiple universities within the South African context, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities to strategically communicate values via social media across higher education institutions. Incorporating quantitative methods alongside qualitative approaches could also facilitate the generalisation of findings. Future studies could also include the stakeholders of the universities as a population to provide deeper insights into stakeholder perceptions. This study focused on Instagram and Facebook, but it is recommended that future research investigate other platforms, such as TikTok and LinkedIn, to develop a more holistic understanding of how institutions communicate their values in the digital space. Such investigations could also consider how effectively communicated institutional values contribute to institutional positioning in the digital era and enhance stakeholder engagement. The study's principles and findings could be applied in different contexts to validate and extend the current research. Future research could explore strategies to optimise strategic communication management, thereby strengthening the alignment between institutional values and stakeholder engagement on social media platforms.

6.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher explored the three specific research questions by drawing on the literature review, conducting semi-structured interviews, and applying qualitative content analysis. This chapter also answered the general research question, which was formulated following the identification of the problem statement within the NWU case study. Based on the findings, suggestions were proposed to the NWU. Furthermore, the chapter outlined the study's limitations and provided recommendations for future research, contributing to the broader body of knowledge.

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ANNEXURES A: BASSREC ETHICS APPROVAL



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Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics
Committee (BaSSREC)

Faculty of Humanities Ethics Office for Research,
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Tel: 018 285 2457

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Senate Committee for Research Ethics
Tel: 016 103 4446
Email: Feziwe.Mseleni@nwu.ac.za

11 October 2024

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) on 10/10/2024, the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby approves your study as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-SERC) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title: The management of social media platforms to strategically communicate North-West University values to stakeholders.

Study Leader/Supervisor (Principal Investigator)/Researcher: Dr. L.B. Sutton and Dr. C. Mbengabanda

Student/Research Team: S.N. Ndlovu (29362334)

Ethics number:

N	W	U	-	0	1	0	0	0	-	2	4	-	A	7
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Status: S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation

Application Type: Single study

Commencement date: 10/10/2024

Risk: Low risk

Expiry date: 10/10/2025

Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.

Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):

General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- The study leader/supervisor (principal investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the BaSSREC:
 - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the study; and



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Basic and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC)

Faculty of Humanities Ethics Office for Research,

Training and Support

Tel: 018 285 2457

Email: Erhabor.Idemudia@nwu.ac.za

03 October 2025

APPROVAL FOR CONTINUATION OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

Ethics number: NWU-01000-24-A7

Study title: The management of social media platforms to strategically communicate North-West University values to stakeholders.

Study leader/supervisor: Dr. L.B. Sutton

Student: S.N. Ndlovu

Application type: Single study

Risk level: Low

Dear Researcher

You are kindly informed that this application was reviewed for monitoring at the meeting of the North-West University Basic and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC), Faculty of Humanities, North-West University, held on 01/10/2025. Following the review of the application, it has been decided that the study is approved for continuation.

Suspension	
Continuation	X
Termination	

Approval date: 01/10/2025

Expiry date: 01/10/2026

If you have any questions or need further assistance, please contact BaSSREC.

Yours sincerely

Professor Erhabor Idemudia Chairperson: NWU-BaSSREC

ANNEXURES B: GATEKEEPER APPROVAL



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14 October 2024

RESEARCH GATEKEEPER APPROVAL LETTER

Based on the documentation provided by the researcher specified below, on 09-October-2024 the North-West University (NWU) Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (NWU -BaSSREC) hereby grants permission for the specific project (as indicated below) to be conducted at the NWU:

Project title: The management of social media platforms to strategically communicate North-West University values to stakeholders.

Project leaders: Dr. L.B. Sutton and Dr. C. Mbengabanda

Researcher/Project Team: S.N. Ndlovu (29362334)

Ethics reference no: NWU-01000-24-A7

Risk: Low risk

Approval date: 10/10/2024

Expiry date: 10/10/2025

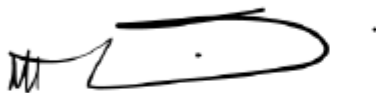
General Conditions of Approval:

- The NWU-BASSREC will not take the responsibility to recruit research participants or to gather data on behalf of the researcher. This committee can therefore not guarantee the participation of our relevant stakeholders.
- Any changes to the research protocol within the permission period (for a maximum of 1 year) must be communicated to the NWU- BASSREC. Failure to do so will lead to withdrawal of the permission.
- The NWU- BASSREC should be provided with a report or document in which the results of said project are disseminated.

Please note that under no circumstances will any personal information of possible research subjects be provided to the researcher by the NWU-BASSREC. The NWU complies with the Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000 (PAIA) as well as the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPI). For an application to access such information please contact Ms Annamarie De Kock (018 285 2771) for the relevant enquiry form or more information on how the NWU complies with PAIA and POPI.

The NWU-BASSREC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher and wishes you well with your project. Please do not hesitate to contact the NWU-BaSSREC for any further enquiries or requests for assistance at BaSSREC-Admin@nwu.ac.za.

Prof. Erhabor Idemudia

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'E' followed by a large, sweeping loop and a small dot at the end.

Chairperson NWU-Basic Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Current details: C:\Users\27800106\Downloads\Gatekeeper permission letter.docm
27 August 2024

File reference: 9.1.5.3.5

ANNEXURES C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM



DATE: 11 October 2024

BaSSREC Authorisation

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke, is written over a horizontal line.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM

Title of the research project	The management of social media platforms to strategically communicate NWU values to stakeholders
Ethics number	NWU-01000-24-A7
Principal investigator	Stanley Ndlovu
Student number	29362334
Address	79 Pietersburg Street, Chris Flats (no 7) Polokwane , 0700
Email address	Stanleyndzalama77@gmail.com
Contact number	078 782 9774

You are being invited to take part in a research project that forms part of my..... Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this project. Please ask the researcher any questions about any part of this project that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you could be involved. Also, your participation is **entirely** voluntary and you are free to decline to participate. If you say no, this will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do agree to take part. Prior to publication of the study's results (or the point that publication is in process), you may also withdraw the data you generate.

This study has been approved by the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) of the Faculty of Humanities of the North-West University (NWU.....) and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of the international Singapore Statement on Research Integrity (2010) and the ethical guidelines of the National Health Research Ethics Council. It might be necessary for the research ethics committee

members or relevant authorities to inspect the research records to make sure that we (the researchers) are conducting research in an ethical manner.

What is this research study all about?

- The study is an investigation of how social media platforms are managed to strategically communicate NWU values to stakeholders. The aim of the study is to understand how social media platforms are managed by the North-West University to strategically communicate its values. For the gathering of this information, the researcher will use semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis.
- The researcher has been trained to use the methods outlined above for the purpose of the study. Approximately 8 participants from the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department that works with the social media of the institution and communication of the values on various platforms will be included in the semi-structured interviews of this study.

The objectives of this research are:

- To determine the principles of the strategic communication management theory and the social media engagement theory that are applicable to communicate the NWU values to stakeholders through its social media platforms, by means of a literature study.
- To determine the perception of the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department on their management of social media platforms to strategically communicate the NWU's values to stakeholders, using semi-structured interviews.
- To investigate the extent to which the NWU values are strategically communicated to stakeholders on social media platforms, using content analysis.

Why have you been invited to participate?

- You have been invited to participate because of your direct involvement in managing and communicating NWU values using various social media platforms to reach stakeholders. You are employed in the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department and therefore have the relevant knowledge and experience associated with the topic and what the researcher wants to achieve with the study.
- You will be excluded if:
 - you do not hold a position at the NWU Corporate Relations and Marketing department at the time that the interviews are conducted.

What will your responsibilities be?

- You will be invited to participate in the noted study by semi-structured interviews via an invitation email.
- You will be expected to answer questions during a semi-structured interview about your perception of strategically communicating NWU values using various social media platforms to reach stakeholders.
- You will have 7 days to indicate whether you would be willing to participate.

- You will be requested to sign this Informed Consent Statement before the commencement of the study to ensure you know what is expected from you and what your rights are and to ensure if there are any issues they be clarified before interview date.
- You will be asked to select a platform for engagement (online or a one-on-one meeting in your office if located at MC) and to propose a suitable date and time for the interview.

Will you benefit from taking part in this research?

- You will not receive compensation or be reimbursed for taking part in the study, and you will probably not directly benefit as a participant in this study.
- The indirect benefit will probably be that the organisation (NWU) will gain insight into how social media can be used to strategically communicate its values to stakeholders, and could, furthermore, guide theory (contributing to knowledge generation).

Are there risks involved in your taking part in this research and how will these be managed?

The possible risks in this study, and how these will be managed, are summarised in the table below:

Possible risk	Mitigation strategy
COVID 19 risk during face-to-face interviews.	The South African health department has cleared that it is not compulsory to take Covid-19 mitigation action. However, with the recent flu season in mind, should a participant require both the researcher and participant to wear a mask during the interview, it will be done in such a way.
Emotional distress of the participants.	You will be asked about your perception on matters related to the NWU's social media pages to communicate its values with stakeholders, and will not be asked sensitive or personal questions. As such, the study offers little threat, and counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists or social workers are not needed.
Tiredness and discomfort.	The semi-structured interviews will be a conversation of about 40 to 60 minutes. You should not experience tiredness or discomfort during this time. If you do, you can take a 5-minute comfort break and then continue with the interview.
Lack of privacy and comfort during interviews.	The interviews will be conducted via an online platform (your preferred medium) or in your office if you are located on MC and choose to have a face-to-face conversation. The interview will be scheduled at a time and date convenient for you. You will therefore participate from a location convenient to you and a device convenient to you. Seeing that you chose the location from where you

	will digitally or in person participate in the interview, there are no potential hazards or risks that could arise from the location. You can also make sure that there is no lack of privacy or discomfort during this time. There is no need to arrange for emergency care situations.
--	--

- *However, we do believe that the benefits to you and to science (as noted in the previous section) outweigh the risks we have listed. If you disagree, then please feel free not to participate in this study. We will respect your decision.*
- *Should we learn, in the course of the research, that someone is harming you, or that you are intending to harm someone, then we must tell someone who can help you/warn the person you are intending to harm.*

Who will have access to the data?

The following procedures will be observed in line with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA):

Principle	How will this be done?	When will this be done?
Anonymity	Anonymity will be ensured by the principal investigator who will assign a fictitious code to you before the interview starts. Only this name will be used in the research process. For example, Participant A, Participant B, etc.	Before the interview commences and after the interview has been conducted.
Confidentiality	Confidentiality will include the use of pseudonyms for participants. It involves not disclosing any information gained from an interviewee deliberately or accidentally in ways that might identify an individual. It should be noted that the NWU as institution is identified in the study and reporting. The participants will, however, be kept anonymous.	After the fieldwork has been completed. During analysis and the write-up of findings. During the reporting of findings. During the publication of findings in the form of articles, books, conference proceedings, etc.
De-identification of data	All identifiable personal information will be de-identified to ensure that no information identifies any participants.	After the fieldwork has been completed. Before data analysis and the write-up of findings start.
Data storage	All data collected for the purpose of the research will be stored safely in electronic format for a period of five years after which it will be destroyed. The data will be saved in an encrypted file on the student's password-protected laptop. The primary investigator will ensure data that both hard-(printed) if used, soft copy (electronic) are safely locked away and password-protected, respectively. Only approved people in my research team	During the fieldwork. After the fieldwork has been completed During analysis and the write-up of findings. During the reporting of findings. During the publication of findings in the form of articles, books, conference proceedings, etc.

	(namely my supervisors) will have access to my raw data where the need arises. At the analysis stage, as will be the case throughout, the use of coding will reinforce participants' non-identification, hence upholding the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity.	
Privacy	<i>Privacy</i> will be ensured by not probing unnecessarily if you do not wish to discuss particular matters.	During the fieldwork.
Transcription/coding of data	I will not use a <i>transcriber</i> for the purpose of the transcripts after the interview. I will not use a <i>statistician/coder</i> for the purpose of the transcripts after the interview.	The primary investigator will be responsible for transcribing the data. Therefore, no other person will have access to the data, except for the supervisor of the study. The primary investigator will be required to sign a NWU Confidentiality Agreement before the study commences.
Translation/interpreter services	I will not use a <i>translator/interpreter</i> for the purpose of the interviews/explaining the informed consent, etc.	N/A

Collection of only relevant personal information:

Collection of only relevant personal information	I, the principal investigator, will only collect personal biographical and opinion-related data about the topic I am studying.	For the purpose of this study the following biographical information will be collected: Occupation details such as how long in a position and working for/with the NWU Corporate and Marketing department. For the purpose of this study the following opinion-related information will be collected, based on the following themes: strategic communication, social media management, values, stakeholders, etc.
--	--	--

What will happen to the data?

The data from this study will be reported in the following ways: the data from the semi-structured interviews will be transcribed by the primary investigator, and from the transcribed data the conclusions will be reported in an MA in Communication dissertation, to answer the research questions. In all of this reporting, you will not be personally identified. This means that the reporting will not include your name or details that will help others to know that you participated.

This is a once-off study, but the data may be re-used in the form of conference presentations and articles published in academic journals.

Will you be paid/compensated to take part in this study and are there any costs involved?

No, you will not be paid/compensated to take part in the study. As the semi-structured interviews will take place online or at your office if you are on MC and prefer this option – therefore, there will be no compensation for travel costs. There will thus be no costs involved.

How will you know about the findings?

- The general findings of the research will be shared with you by the primary investigator once the research findings have been published in the form of an MA in Communication dissertation on the NWU's Library website, the Boloka repository, after examination.

Is there anything else that you should know or do?

- You can contact the primary researchers, Stanley Ndzalama Ndlovu at 0787829774 and stanleyndzalama77@gmail.com if you have any further queries or encounter any problems. You may also contact the main supervisor of the study, Dr Lucinda B Sutton at lucinda.sutton@nwu.ac.za or the co-supervisor, Dr Chilombo Banda at Chilombo.Mbenga@nwu.ac.za
- You can contact the chair of the Basic Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Prof Erhabor Idemudia) at 018 389 2899 or Erhabor.Idemudia@nwu.ac.za if you have any concerns or complaints that have not been adequately addressed by the researcher.
- You will receive a copy of this information and consent form for your own records.

Declaration by participant

By signing below, I _____ agree to take part in a research study entitled: "An analysis of the Potchefstroom Chamber of Commerce's social media platforms to foster engagement and build relationships with external stakeholders"

I declare that:

- I provide *informed consent*.
 - Thus, I have read and understood this information and consent form and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
 - Thus, I have had a chance to ask questions to both the person obtaining consent, as well as the researcher (if this is a different person), and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I provide *voluntary consent*.
 - Thus, I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and I have not been pressurised to take part.
 - Thus, I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.
 - Thus, I am aware of the fact that I may request that the researcher does not continue with said recording if I request it.
- I provide *specific consent*.
 - Thus, I understand that what I contribute (what I report/say/write/draw/produce visually) could be reproduced publically and/or quoted, but without reference to my personal identity.
 - I provide *specific consent*. Thus, I consent to an audio and/or audio-visual recording of the semi-structured interview.

Signed at (place) _____ on (date) _____ 20 ____

Signature of participant

Signature of witness

- | | |
|--|--|
| • You may contact me again | ☐ Yes ☐ No |
| • I would like a summary of the findings of this research | ☐ Yes ☐ No |
| • I would like feedback on my functioning/wellbeing as reflected in the questionnaires I completed | ☐ Yes ☐ No |

The best way to reach me is:

Name & Surname: _____
Postal Address: _____
Email: _____
Phone Number: _____
Cell Phone Number: _____

In case the above details change, please contact the following person who knows me well and who does not live with me and who will help you to contact me:

Name & Surname: _____

Phone/ Cell Phone Number /Email: _____

Declaration by person obtaining consent (if not the researcher/primary investigator)

I (*name*) _____ declare that:

- I explained the information in this document to _____
- I encouraged him/her to ask questions and took adequate time to answer them.
- I am satisfied that he/she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as discussed above
- I did/did not use an interpreter.

Signed at (*place*) _____ on (*date*) _____ 20 _____

Signature of person obtaining consent

Signature of witness

Declaration by researcher/primary investigator

I Lizé-Mari van Dyk _____ declare that:

- I explained the information in this document to the fullest extent to the plausible participants.
- I encouraged them to ask questions and took adequate time to answer them.
- I am satisfied that they adequately understand all aspects of the research, as discussed above
- I did/did not use an interpreter.

Signed at (*place*) Stampriet _____ on (*date*) 17 May _____ 2024 _____

Signature of researcher

Signature of witness

ANNEXURES D: ETHICS CERTIFICATE



CERTIFICATE OF ATTENDANCE

This certificate is awarded to

Stanley Ndlovu

In recognition of attending the Faculty of Humanities' Ethics Training Session
on Tuesday, 18 April 2023

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. Nel'.

Professor Mima Nel
Deputy Dean Research and Innovation
Faculty of Humanities

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'S. Coetzee van Rooy'.

Professor Susan Coetzee van Rooy
Chairperson: ECLM

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'E. Idemudia'.

Professor Erhabor Idemudia
Chairperson: BaSSREC and HSSREC

18 April 2023
Date



ANNEXURES E: LANGUAGE EDITING CERTIFICATE

29 October 2025

GRAMMARIAN'S CERTIFICATE

This certifies that the undersigned has thoroughly reviewed all pages of the thesis titled: **"The management of social media platforms to strategically communicate North-West University values to stakeholders"** by **Mr S.N. Ndlovu**, in accordance with the established structural rules governing the composition of sentences, phrases, and words in the English language.

Signed:



Ms RA Basson (MA Research Psychology)

Email: renebabasson@gmail.com

Cell: 0769332281

ANNEXURES F: TURNITIN REPORT

20558481:SN_Ndlovu_thesis_Changes_Accepted.docx			
ORIGINALITY REPORT			
15%	12%	13%	5%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS
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8	hdl.handle.net		