

**OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS OF THE INTERNET AS A PUBLIC
RELATIONS PLATFORM: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF SELECTED
ORGANIZATIONS IN KENYA**

BY

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DECLARATION

Declaration by the Candidate

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DEDICATION

To my supportive family, including my parents Mr. and Mrs Thomas Malel, my son Ethan Kiptoo, my brothers and sisters.

ABSTRACT

Public relations (hereafter, PR) is defined as a set of communications techniques designed to create and maintain relations between an organization and its publics. PR has gained increasing organizational importance in recent times, as it has been emphasized in various platforms. Despite the Internet being increasingly used by organizations as a platform for PR, its Opportunities and constraints have not been empirically established. Further, a review of current literature shows that the use of the Internet for PR in organizations has been empirically investigated mainly in other contexts – especially in Europe and America – but not in Africa. However, most of these investigations focused on specific components of Internet and not the holistic use of the Internet for PR. Therefore, this study sought to investigate how organizations utilize the Internet as a PR platform. The following specific research questions were addressed: How does internet as PR platform offer Opportunities to organizations? What are the constraints of Internet as a PR platform in organizations? How do stakeholders perceive the Opportunities and Constraints of Internet as PR platform in organizations? The study adopted the relativist-interpretivist research paradigm and a qualitative approach utilizing the multiple case study method. A total of 45 participants were selected. These comprised respondents each from a financial, telecommunications, insurance, PR Agency and online shopping business. The organizations involved in the study were sampled purposively. In-depth interviews, observation and document analysis were used to generate data. Data analysis was done thematically. Public Relations Theories guided the interpretations of the study's findings. From the study findings, the key Opportunities or opportunities of the Internet for internal and external communication included customer feedback, social interaction, and information sharing at low cost and high speed. The Internet was also said to enable organizations to obtain goods and services at the most convenient time and enhance brand awareness by ensuring large coverage at low costs. Among the constraints of Internet as a PR platform in organizations were security and trust concerns, content mismanagement, lack of tools of monitoring and evaluation, ineffective utilization of the platforms, lack of expert knowledge, experience and poor role specification. The stakeholders perceived the Opportunities and constraints of Internet as PR platform in organization as useful tools for immediate feedback, easy access of goods and services and organizational communication. On security, most of them said the Internet tools used were secure because of the security checks and logging in processes involved. From these findings, it was concluded that the Internet is a vital platform for PR in organizations, despite the many constraints to its application in PR. Therefore, the study recommends that organizations or business models formulate unique Internet strategies and policies based on its capabilities to realize its potential while minimizing constraints.

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OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

This section introduces the operational terms and their definitions used in the study.

The terms have been used throughout the study.

Public Relations (PR): This refers to communication and building of mutual relationships between an organisation and its publics. It is a deliberate attempt through sustained efforts to communicate to the public with the aim of obtaining predetermined objectives; it also entails the management of problems or issues within and without the organization. PR also helps the management to stay informed about and responsive to public opinion.

Opportunity: Refers to prospects, advantages, merits, prominence and other benefits presented to an organization and its publics.

Constraint: A term used to refer to limitations and challenges of Internet use as a PR platform.

Internet: It is a global system of publicly accessible networks. Essentially, it is a medium by which people collaborate and share information with the aid of Internet tools such as video-sharing, photo-sharing, blogs and social networking, websites, virtual worlds, micro-blogs, email among others.

Internet as PR platform: The use of global network for PR activities that include; monitoring and responding to changes in the external environment, addressing issues, expectations, building customer relationships, improvement of organizational reputation and maintaining effective working environments within the organization through employee communication with the aid of Internet-based communication tools.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
ICT	Information Communication Technology
IPR	Institute of Public Relations
IT	Information Technology
KBC	Kenya Commercial Bank
NHIF	National Hospital Insurance Fund
KIO	Kenyan Information officer
PIO	Principle Information officer
PR	Public Relations
SMS	Short Messaging Services
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
XML	extensible mark-up language
XPRL	Xtensible Public Relations Language

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overall introduction to the study. It begins by describing the context of the study, which provides insights into the academic, social and geographical environments in which the study is situated. The next sub-sections then describe the statement of the problem, the research questions that guided the study, and finally the scope and rationale for the study.

1.2 Context of the Study

This section presents the academic and the social context of the study on the Opportunities and the constraints of Internet as a PR platform in selected organizations. The academic context explains the applications of the Internet in organizations and the expected benefits while the social context explains where the study would take place including the PR status in Kenya.

1.2.1 Academic Context of the Study

Academically, this study focused on Opportunities and constraints of Internet as a public relations (hereafter PR) platform of organizations in Kenya. Organizations are important to PR studies because they have unique communication and relationship-building needs. The Web is equally an increasingly important platform for PR. Many organizations use Internet-based communication elements or tools to build relationships with key publics. Through the Internet, these organizations provide a variety of information and services to a diverse group of stakeholders. The Internet

enables publics to be active and selective in their exposure to marketing, advertising and PR messages.

PR professionals act effectively on behalf of organizations. They monitor and track both traditional and new media sources for potential issues, then respond accordingly. PR is one of many professions that have been affected considerably by this online revolution (Phillips, 2001). The digital revolution has provided PR practice with new communication challenges and opportunities. Therefore, this study explored PR practices employed by organizations communicate and build communication channels with their stakeholders.

1.2.1.1 Public Relations

As part of the academic context of the study, it is important to define the terrain of PR as encompassing professional practices by which an organization establishes and maintains a good and favourable reputation with its internal and external environment. PR processes need to be continuously developed (Iacob, 2015). There are mutual benefits that an organization and its target publics derive by maintaining good relationships. PR specialists target specific audiences either directly or indirectly with the aim of creating strong relationships that are good for business. The practice of PR dates back to the early 20th century. Since then, it has evolved with the changing technology from using the traditional channels to modern channels ones (Dilenschneider & American Management, 2010). Modern PR practices focus on relationship building and continuous stakeholder engagement.

The channels of PR are designed to anticipate, analyse and interpret public opinion about the organization and its services or products. PR activities include press

releases, public appearances, newsletters and media postings that update or inform the publics of the developments within an organization, its services or products. The world of business is marked by fierce competition. Progressively, PR practitioners are realising the need to diversify the channels they use in their work.

This explains the increasing use of internet-based media such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter in PR. Internet tools like blogs, websites and social media networks are common techniques that contemporary PR specialists make use of to communicate with the publics (Peacemaker, Robinson & Hurst, 2016).

1.2.1.2 The Internet

The Internet is a global system of interconnected computer networks that use Internet protocols (IP) suites to link billions of devices across the world (O'Brien, 2016). It can also be defined as a global network connecting millions of computers by which data, opinions and news are shared. The Internet functions as a decentralized platform where several other web-supported platforms can be used to connect users across the world. The Internet is a massive network of networks that is capable of connecting millions of users globally thus enabling individuals and organizations to share information and services to the targeted audiences (O'Brien, 2016).

Gerpott and May (2016) indicate that integration of the Internet into business operations has enhanced efficiency and increased sales. The influence of Internet use on business performance can be specially linked to PR functions. In PR, the Internet of Things (IoT) is suitable in promoting services associated with organizations. There are over 3.4 billion Internet users across the world, representing a 40% of the world's population. Kenyan population using the Internet is estimated at 60% providing a

good platform for organizations to embrace Internet for PR functions (Ndung'u & Waema, 2011).

1.2.1.3 The Internet and Public Relations

Avidar (2011) indicates that the Internet has revolutionized PR practice by making communication easy and efficient.

The Internet provides new opportunities for individuals and businesses which were unimagined in the era of traditional media. It plays an important role in shaping public opinion with an aim of influencing the targeted audience. Avidar further indicates that organizations whose PR functions are not effectively communicating with the online community cannot be effective in shaping and maintaining the desired public image. The Internet provides easier and faster ways of reaching millions of people within a short time through newsfeed and public posts on the social media platforms. PR functions can either create good or poor public image. For instance, cases of suspected integrity issues can be cleared either by posting updates on such events and creating customer confidence through assurance of trustable services/products.

Bobbitt (1995) opines that PR and Internet can have a synergic association. In this relationship, PR professionals invest and engage the Internet in reaching their target audience. During the course of interactions of PR functions and the Internet, some challenges are met that reduce the efficiency and affordability of Internet as a PR platform.

1.2.2 Social Context of the Study

The study took place in Five selected organizations in Kenya, namely: One Financial Institution, a Telecommunications Company, Hospital Insurance Fund, Communications Agency and one Online shopping business company.

1.2.2.1 Organizations Under Study

The study focused on organizations in Kenya that have adopted the Internet as a platform to facilitate its Public Relations functions. Research indicates that the last decade has seen organizations shift from the traditional PR channels to embrace the new ones including Internet and other social media platforms.

These organizations have embraced platforms like Email, Websites, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn accounts to engage their stakeholders. The organizations chosen are based in Kenya with or without branches in the neighbouring countries. A keen look at the organizations indicates that they have communication departments having sub-sections of PR, a complete PR Department and/or having customer relations department that embraces the internet and the social medial platforms for communication. The selection of these organizations is pre-determined by their usage of the Internet platforms to communicate with its publics. The description of the organizations depicts their history of presence in Kenya, their branches (if available), coverage within the region and the PR structure of the organization.

1.2.2.2 The Financial Institution

The selected Bank Group has focused on online PR to engage its clients and make profits. For instance, the organization focused on PR and shifted from engaging the

clients on the customer desks only to engaging them through different platforms. Sriramesh and Vercic (2009) indicate that the PR platforms and strategies initiated by the former groups Managing Director, yielded fruits through create good corporate citizenry and valuing the clients at every point of contact. The office of the Public Communications has strategized itself to answer to the changing platforms of the Kenyan population.

In 2015, the Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK) announced the group would have the best overall PR campaign dubbed *Mifugoni Mali Programme*. The award pointed out to the continued platforms created by the bank to engage its clients. The bank had also other PR campaigns that won the PRSK recognition including the “sponsorship campaign of the year” that was won by groups Foundation, and the PR campaign dubbed *the groups Back to School* won the New Media PR Campaign of the year (PRSK, 2015).

The Bank Group has been included in the study because it provides a platform to accurately indicate how corporate PR campaigns can transform operations and project a positive organization image. The Group has several branches across the East African region with branches in Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Burundi, Tanzania and Rwanda. The bank provides a perfect opportunity to understand the effects of establishing online PR platforms with its customers since it has been recognized as a major corporate player in Kenya and across the East Africa.

1.2.2.3 PR and Communications Agency

The PR and Communications Agency is a leading professional communications consultancy situated in Nairobi Kenya. It was started in 1997 and this has led to its

continuous growth embracing the modern forms of communication like Internet and social media. The Agency specializes in strategic communication as well as public relations. The company prides itself as “the leading independent and indigenous strategic communications agency in East Africa.” It has some of its clients like KCB, Kenya Red Cross, Kenya Airways and Safaricom among others. I chose this organizations as it leads to more insights on the choices of the marketing and advertising strategies embraced by the big corporate firms in Kenya including Internet marketing and Public Relations campaigns.

1.2.2.4 Online Shopping Business

The online shopping company selected has an online shopping site that offers a wide range of products including home appliances, fashion, kid’s items, and a range of electronics. The company started in 2012 in Nigeria and has expanded to cover Kenya, Egypt, Ghana, United Kingdom among other countries. The company got the 2013 World Retail Awards for the Best New Retail Launch and this improved its global ranking as an online marketing place, the company is chosen since it provides a platform for Internet marketing and building customer relations online where clients can browse services and products and buy them from the owners or stores. The company has a group of PR, marketing, customer care experts always online, the experts are in one large call centre responding to customers online.

The company embraces Internet marketing and advertising to reach to its target publics. It has good experience in Internet marketing and relationship building and this made me chose it to get their experiences of using Internet for public relations, sales and marketing and the impacts of engaging social media platforms. This company was chosen as opposed to its market competitors like Killimall and OLX

since it is more famous and popular with electronics buyers. It has a large call center with many relationship executives, sales and marketing, customer care who use the internet to respond to clients' needs.

1.2.2.5 Telecommunication Company

The selected company is the leading telecommunications firm in Kenya with over 20 million subscribers. The company is an internet provider with a dedicated customer service lines and social media platforms where it handles clients requests and concerns. The company has several platforms for communicating with its clients that include Live Chat, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, Blog, Email and YouTube that are used for supporting the large client base. This presents an opportunity where customers can relate to the company through the Internet and get services remotely without visiting the offices. The Company has been selected as it presents a leading force in Internet services provision including marketing and PR activities.

1.2.2.6 Hospital Insurance Fund

The Insurance Fund is a State Parastatal established in 1966 as a department under the Ministry of Health.

The original Act of Parliament that set up this Fund in 1966 has over the years been reviewed to accommodate the changing healthcare needs of the Kenyan population, employment and restructuring in the health sector. Currently Insurance Fund Act No 9 of 1998 governs the Fund. The transformation of Insurance fund from a department of the Ministry of Health to a state of corporation was aimed at improving effectiveness and efficiency. The Fund's core mandate is to provide medical insurance cover to all its members and their declared dependants (spouse and children). The

membership is open to all Kenyans who have attained the age of 18 years and years and have a monthly income of more than Ksh 1000. The fund has 61 fully autonomous branches across the country.

Each of these branches offers all Insurance services including payment of benefits to hospitals or members or employers. Smaller satellite offices and service points in district hospitals also serve these branches. The Fund is a good research site because it has a large PR department with many PR and communications practitioners dealing with both individual and corporate clients and stakeholders. It has PR activities, member education for both internal and external publics.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The problem that prompted this study is conceptualized at three levels: academic. Social and organizational. The three levels are explained below;

1.3.1 Academic Problem

Academically, studies shows that use of Internet for PR in organizations has not been empirically investigated in the African and indeed the Kenyan context. Most existing studies have been conducted in in Europe and America but not in Africa.

Furthermore, most such investigations carried out have tended to focus on specific components of Internet and not the holistic use of the Internet for PR. Public relations professionals have been struggling to describe the strategic contribution that public relations make for an organization's success for many years (Rawjee and et al., 2012). There have been a number of studies emerging since 1990s on the practices of public relations and its related components used for an organization and publics. Stroh (2007) maintained that in order to build and enhance healthy relationships between an

organization and its publics, it is vital to recognize that many cross-disciplines have been integrated to build a theory of public relations in terms of relationships and relationship management. Presumably this idea strengthens the view that public relation is a communication process that maintains mutual benefit for both an organization and its public. But the majority of past research in the area is descriptive leaving a gap in explaining the actual activities observed in organizations.

The phenomenon of Internet and PR practice has not been widely explored in Africa and specifically Kenya despite the region showing tremendous potential and growth of Public Relations. The only few African countries that have been studied in connection with Public Relations are South Africa (Holtzhausen, Petersen & Tindall, 2003), Nigeria (Molleda & Alhassan, 2006), and Ghana (Wu & Baah-Boakye, 2009). There is, however, some research that has been conducted by PR consultants and corporate organizations which, unfortunately, remains in private custody thus rarely influencing the direction of the practice in Kenya (Mbeke, 2009). Although review of literature shows that some PR activities in organizations have been investigated internationally especially in the United States and Netherlands.

The investigations largely show various studies on areas of the Internet and Public Relations mainly focusing on how practitioners use the Internet tools for PR, and not organizations. Most investigations identified are publications that focused on effects or impact of specific Internet communication tools such as twitter, blogs and other social media platforms on PR practice.

1.3.2 Social Problem

The actual benefits and challenges to the society that accrue from using the Internet and other social media platforms for information access has not been empirically established. The potential harm possibly associated with social media platforms for individuals and organizations have not been robustly explored through research. Yet, many organizations have reportedly suffered bad publicity or have been accused of outdated, inadequate or sometimes misleading information on their websites. On the other hand, many of organizations are spending a lot of income on using the Internet platforms citing several Opportunities while constraining investment in other organizational programmes, without any research-based proofs..

The wider society has embraced, in the recent past, the use of social media as a means of communicating and sharing information of interest,. The society focuses on the means that provide affordable and efficient means of talking to each other. PR functions use the social media platforms to project the information intended with a particular message. Online journals and magazines use social media platforms to inform the audience and create the public image they intend. All these are done without any clearly documented opportunities and constraints of using social media platforms in society in general or organizations in particular. Published reports indicate that the trends on the numbers of Internet users are on the rise with increasing social medial platforms.

This in turn provides challenges to organizations when they have no trustworthy references to guide the maximization of the opportunities and manage the constraints that may occur from such scenarios. This provides a gap that this study contributes to.

1.3.3 Organizational Problem

Although all types of organizations may benefit from communicating with publics through the Web, this can only happen if the internet provisions in such organizations are harnessed to enhance relations between organizations and their publics. There are documented cases of very poor relations between organizations and their publics.

Organizations need to adopt some measures to ensure that the reputation of their organizations' products and services are enhanced, at the same time establish and sustain mutual relationship with their public. One prominent way organizations globally can achieve this is through good Public Relations (PR).

Many organizations, operating on minimal budgets, have traditionally relied on Public Relations as a cost-effective way to reach publics. Maintaining an organization is difficult because there are many different institution large and small working on similar business and counting on the same active publics. The Internet has been identified as a potential equalizer for organizations because it offers a low cost, direct and controllable communication channel that can magnify their efforts and create linkages with internal and external publics and other stakeholders. Internet can be used effectively to bring members of different groups together.

But despite the Internet being increasingly used by organizations for PR, those in Kenya have paid the price of unsuccessful websites by not integrating the medium as part of the organizational objective or directive.

Many organizations do not have an online presence; they mainly use the Internet to pass information without engaging the public through the communication platforms.

A lot of money has been used to launch and maintain Internet based communication elements for PR purposes yet organizations have also failed to utilize the dialogic elements of the Internet in order to build relationships with their publics and in most occasions the Internet communication element have been labelled as trends with no credibility and lasting value.

Studying the communication potential and constraints of the Internet is important because many organizations often lack expertise and sophistication in their Public Relations efforts. The Internet may be one of the best channels for organizations to communicate their messages and build mutual and beneficial relations. One way that organizations can use the Internet to build relationships with publics is by fostering Internet based communication platforms for dialogic communication. Esrock and Leighty (1999) suggest that it is likely that the websites were not managed by Public Relations practitioners but by technical or marketing staff and therefore were not efficient at servicing media requirements. They use the same assumption to explain why the websites were not used to proactively engage with the publics but only as a medium of information dissemination similar to traditional channels such as print and broadcast.

1.4 Aim of the Study

The issues stated above prompted this study whose aim was sought to investigate the opportunities and constraints of the internet as a PR platform to enable the informed mitigation of the academic, social and organizational aspects of the problem stated above. The specific research questions to be addressed by the study were as stated below.

1.5 Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following research objectives:

1. To identify the opportunities of Internet as Public Relations platform in organizations
2. To determine the constraints of Internet as a Public Relations platform in organizations
3. To examine the perceptions of stakeholders on the opportunities and constraints of Internet as Public Relations platform in organizations

1.6 Research Questions

The following specific research questions guided the study:

1. How does the Internet as Public Relations platform offer opportunities to organizations?
2. What are the constraints of Internet as a Public Relations platform in organizations?
3. How do stakeholders perceive Opportunities and constraints of Internet as Public Relations platform in organizations?

1.7 Scope of the Study

Scope is defined as the parameters that were covered in the study. Therefore, this section presents three aspects of scope: content, context, and methodology.

1.7.1 Content Scope

In terms of content scope, the first research question explored, opportunities, accessibility, and availability of Internet from the selected organizations as well as comparison with the traditional means of PR. The opportunity forms included speed of communication, product delivery, interactivity, customization and personalization; efficiency in management etc. Opportunities of the Internet as a PR platform provide ideal forums for group communication and interaction. The study perceived the Internet as PR platform that has dramatically changed the way organizations distribute information, interact with key publics, deal with crises, and manage issues. Benefits accrued from Internet as a PR platform in comparison to achieving the intended function were also documented as Opportunities since they help achieve organizational objectives.

The issues to cover in question two included the barriers PR specialists/personnel encounter when engaging Internet platforms for PR functions, the competition from other PR platforms, especially the traditional media, coverage of the Internet platforms to the targeted audience, and the reception of the targeted audience.

The study also focused on the infrastructural challenges that organizations and individuals faced in Kenya in relation to the access and availability of Internet for advertising, marketing and informing the audience. Case studies on adverse public images were also cited as forms of constraints associated with the Internet as a PR platform. Issues raised from question three included the perceptions of the stakeholders in relation to how organizations and individuals have used Internet as a PR platform. Recommendations and suggestions on how Internet can be used for PR functions were captured in this question. Perceptions on the better approaches to

embracing social medial platforms for the purpose of performing PR functions were included in this question.

1.7.2 Contextual Scope

Contextually, the study was conducted in Kenya within the boundaries of the selected organizations that included: One financial institution a Financial Institution, a Telecommunications company, one Insurance Fund, one PR and Corporate Communications Agency, and one online shopping company.

Specifically, the research was conducted in the organizations' specific units and the PR/customer relations departments. The participants were drawn from these organizations' PR departments to include the PR officers and communications experts, the sales marketing and advertising sections, ICT experts working in the department and other stakeholders such as customers and management representatives.

1.7.3 Methodological Scope

The study adopted a relativist-interpretivist research paradigm. The study was based on a qualitative research approach, with a multiple case study method. The research data was generated by use of in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis. A sample size of 45 participants was selected through purposive sampling from PR and Marketing departments, ICT experts and stakeholders among them being the management representatives and stakeholders. More on research methodology is discussed in Chapter Three of this report.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

Limitations experienced in this study mainly related to the content: First, the area of PR and Internet is scarcely researched by communication and PR practitioners. Therefore, research materials, including academic journals, books and papers, were very limited. This limitation was ameliorated by widening the scope of research through the case study method. Moreover, interviews, document analysis and observation methods of data collection were triangulated to provide reliable information. Research on secondary sources, especially on areas of Internet and PR in different fields, was also used to strengthen the research findings.

Secondly, PR and Internet use in PR tool constitute such a vast area of research; it was not possible to cover all of its aspects in a single study.

This was ameliorated by having a focus on selected areas which were common to organizations in Kenya. These included websites, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Email and WhatsApp.

Methodologically, the study was limited to one research approach, which is the qualitative approach with a case study method. It also focused on only 45 respondents. These limitations were, however, alleviated by the fact that a case study provides in-depth analysis of the Internet use as PR platform practice. The data collection methods included key informant interviews, document reviews and observations. During data collection, one limitation that emerged had to do with poor access to respondents. Some were afraid to respond to questions for fear of disclosing organizational information in ways that could be detrimental to their jobs. Seeking

permission and letters to conduct research and use of informed consent helped to overcome this limitation.

1.9 Justification of the Study

The study sought to contribute new knowledge on the benefits the Internet to the practice of PR in organizations. The study findings are especially instructive considering that the Internet is increasingly useful within the organizational contexts. The research also identifies some of the potentialities, opportunities and challenges of the Internet in PR contexts.

The research is also situated within the Kenyan community, which is marked by an increasing number of active Internet and social media users. As such, the research findings highlighted how organizations can exploit the opportunities afforded by increased Internet use to strengthen stakeholder engagements. Moreover, many Kenyan organizations have embraced the Internet and social media as tools of Public Relations.

Therefore, the research findings served to show ways through which companies can gain competitive advantage through comparatively effective application of the Internet in PR.

A review of past research showed that Internet and social media applications have greatly advanced marketing and advertising functions of many organizations. Therefore, it was prudent to determine the best approaches by which the Opportunities of the Internet can benefit the PR practice. The study was also

necessitated by the fact that there were limited studies conducted in Kenya on Internet use as PR platform.

1.10 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study underline how Internet can be an effective tool for informing and influence society. The research underscores how the dynamics of PR are changing from the traditional to modern approaches where Internet and the social media platforms play a critical role. The study also strengthens the relations between organizations and society. From this research, organizations can also gain insights on how to apply the Internet to improve their public image. The study further contributes to evidence-based practices in the field of Public Relations. Organizations can also use the research findings to gain an understanding of the current trends and best practices in the field of PR.

In terms of research methodology, this study adds value to the existing body of knowledge by providing a a detailed explanation that could make this study transferable to other contexts in Communication Studies generally or Public Relations in particular. In regards to the Internet, the study highlights the opportunities and challenges in the use of Internet tools in PR practice. The study findings also provide a knowledge base for PR in Kenya policies in Kenya. Further, the study acts as a reference point for future researchers in the areas of PR and Internet use in the organizational settings.

1.11 Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical approach adopted in this study was the Systems Theory. The Systems theory can be defined as the trans-disciplinary study of the abstract organization of phenomena which are independent of their substance, spatial or temporal scale of their existence (Rousseau, 2015). It investigates both principles that apply across to all complex entities including Internet and Public Relations. Systems theory was proposed in 1940s by Ludwig von Bertalanffy. The systems theory as well as the situational theory applies to the study of the Opportunities and challenges of Internet as a PR platform.

Systems theory is useful in Public Relations because it gives us a way to think about relationships. Generally, systems theory looks at organizations as made up of interrelated parts, adapting and adjusting to changes in the political, economic, and social environments in which they operate. Organizations have recognizable boundaries, within which there must be a communication structure that guides the parts of the organization to achieve organizational goals. The leaders of the organization create and maintain these internal structures (Rousseau, 2015). Grunig, Grunig and Dozier state that the systems perspective emphasizes the interdependence of organizations with their environments, both internal and external to the organization.

According to the systems perspective, organizations depend on resources from their environments, such as “raw materials, a source of employees, and clients or customers for the services or products they produce. The environment needs the organization for its products and services.” Organizations with open systems use public relations

people to bring back information on how productive their relationships are with clients, customers, and other stakeholders. Organizations with closed systems do not seek new information. The decision-makers operate on what happened in the past or on their personal preferences.

Organizations are part of a greater environment made up of many systems. The organization is depicted as being at the centre of the environment where most of the publics are compound -customers, media, community, financial institutions, and government. These groups are called stakeholders because “they and the organization have consequences on each other” they create problems and opportunities for one another. We can use systems theory not only to examine relationships with our external stakeholders but also to look at the internal functions and stakeholders of our organizations. Organizations structure their employees by specific jobs and functions.

Many different departments, such as accounting, legal and Public Relations, make up the managerial function. The production function of an organization might include skilled and unskilled employees who actually make the product or provide the service to customers. The marketing function is made up of sales staff. All of these different employees are interdependent. The monitoring of relationships is a major one for PR people. Through systems theory, one thinks of PR people as boundary spanners, straddling the edge of an organization – looking inside and outside of an organization. Public Relations practitioners are the go-betweens, explaining the organization to its stakeholders and interpreting the environment to the organization. PR experts advise the dominant coalition, the primary decision-makers of the organization, about problems and opportunities in the environment and help these decision makers respond to these changes.

The environment imposes constraints on organizations. For example, customers can boycott an organization's products. The courts can make a business pay damages to people who are injured by its products. Banks can choose not to lend money to an organization. Using the systems theory, one can identify an organization's stakeholders, and by spanning organizational boundaries, one can anticipate each side's relationship needs.

If decision-makers keep their systems open, they allow for the two-way flow of resources and information between the organization and its environment. They use that information for adapting to the environment, or they may use the incoming information to try to control the environment. For example, to control potentially negative media stories, a Nike corporate communicator created the "Issues Brief" to be used when media questioned Nike products. The Issues Brief gave Nike spokes persons information to explain company policies or positions. "Using the concepts of organizations and environments one can begin to create theoretical statements about relationships with stakeholders.

For example, one might say: The more turbulent the environment, the more flexible the Public Relations department needs to be because the stakeholders that could have positive or negative consequences for the organization are constantly changing. Organizations that remain slow to respond or closed to new information from the environment are less likely to build effective relationships with key publics. If organizations have closed systems, it may take a crisis for an organization to accept environmental changes.

1.12 Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the research area and outlined the overall background of the study. The chapter also defined the scope, limitations, justification and significance of the study. The background to the study established that the present world is marked by increased application of Internet technologies in communication and information exchange. Therefore, it is only prudent that organizations find the Internet instrumental in their communicative agendas. Indeed, a preliminary review of literature indicated that many organizations use the Internet to generate and disseminate reliable, accurate and timely information. Considering the purpose and structure, the Internet is fast becoming an organization's greatest asset.

Unfortunately, there is scarce information about the application of the Internet as a PR platform, especially in Kenya. Therefore, the study sought to contribute to existing knowledge for practice, theory and further research in PR. The next chapter provides a review of current literature.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The first section of this chapter defines the concepts related to the study, including the concepts of PR, Internet and PR and Internet use in organizations. The second section discusses the literature in relation to the research objectives. Topics covered include the Opportunities, constraints and perceptions of Internet use as a PR platform. The next section situates the study within the field of Communication Studies and discipline of PR. The next section reviews related models advanced in connection to this study. A description of related studies is also included highlighting the gaps to be filled by this study. The last section of the chapter provides the summary of the main issues revealed in the literature. These sub-topics were chosen in order to build a proper background for the study and to examine how the internet has been studied within the contexts of communication and public relations.

2.2 Definition of Key Concepts

This section presents a definition of key concepts used in the literature review and across the entire study. The definitions provide both the conceptual details and the applications of the key terms.

2.2.1 Public Relations (PR)

PR can be defined as a management function designed to help organizations set its goal and adapt to a changing environment. Public Relations are planned, organized communication activities directed towards specific goals. The practice of Public Relations is one such profession that has considerably been affected by this online

revolution (Phillips, 2001). The contemporary practice of Public Relations was defined back in 1976 by the pioneer in Public Relations education, Rex Harlow, who examined close to 500 definitions.

He concluded that Public Relations is a distinctive management function that helps establish and maintain lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organization and its publics. It involves the management of problems or issues and helps management to keep informed on, and responsive to, public opinion. PR also defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of, and effectively utilize, change. Moreover, PR serves as an early warning system to help anticipate trends, and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tool (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000). From these definitions, it is evident that Public Relations is essentially about communicating effectively in order to build valuable relationships. Therefore, the Internet being a medium for communication is bound to have implications for the practice of PR.

To describe the concept of PR further it is important to understand its origin. PR traces much of its practice back to journalism and mass media. Like the United States, many African countries have the media as the primary spawning ground of Public Relations (Botan, 1992). Despite Public Relations in the United States and many African countries sharing much of its practice in journalism, there are other historical components that bring out different perspectives on the practice of Public Relations in different countries. The origin of Public Relations in Africa goes way back to ancient times. Likewise one can find ancient roots of Public Relations in this Africa in the town crier, gatherings in the village square, and the rhetoric of chiefs.

Others such as Desmond Wilson (2008) see traditional communication forms like talking drums and wooden drums as mass media because of their ability to reach large numbers of people (Ugboajah, 1986).

Just as modern Public Relations practice in the United States predated the nation, African Public Relations practice also predates the independence movement and the achievement of nationhood. Just like in the United States and other developed nations, Kenyan Public Relations can also be traced to journalism. Consequently, Public Relations in Kenya have internalized some journalism values, key among them being able to use some of the developed mass media as their primary communication channel.

According to L'Etang and Muruli (2004), the emergence of Public Relations in Kenya was the consequence of the desire of powerful interest groups, among them the British colonial administration, to create and manage public opinion. It is noted that the exercise of colonial power by a few in the professed interests of the many required careful management of relationships supported by appropriate rhetorical strategies and tactics" (L'Etang & Muruli, 2004). It can be argued that British government Public Relations existed in Kenya from the inception of the colony. It served to build and maintain relationships with key publics and used interpersonal and social relations as the main technique to achieve harmony and acceptance of its goals.

According to Mbeke (2009), the colonial government employed a "top-down" communication model that made use of the chief's *baraza* (a public meeting called by the chief) as the focal point for exchange of communication between the government and the community. When it was not employing the "top-down" communication

structure through the chiefs' *baraza*, the colonial administration was involved in "distribution of propaganda messages to the settler and African communities" (Mbeke, 2009, p. 310).

A look at the structure of communication in the present-day Kenyan government indicates the existence of a top-down structure of communication, similar to the one that existed during the colonial days. Every government ministry or organization has public information officers whose main responsibility is to communicate to the public decisions that the government wants embraced, irrespective of whether or not public opinion was factored when coming up with such decisions. Mbeke (2009) notes that in contemporary Kenya, politicians, business people, clergy and development workers still use the *baraza* model as a forum for information dissemination. The one-way form of communication, referred to as public information by Grunig and Hunt (1984), involves revealing accurate information but engaging in no research that would foster a two-way form of communication.

Another common background that has made contribution to the practice of Public Relations in Kenya is private business. In the private sector, Muruli (2001) states, Public Relations emerged as a consequence of labour conflicts and the important role that international capital played in the Kenyan post-independence economy. Business such as the East African Breweries, Kenya Shell, Kenya Power and Lighting Company, Unilever, and the East Africa Harbors Corporation became aware of the virtues of publicity in the late 1940s. After independence in 1963, most business organizations and union groups acknowledged the need for planned Public Relations. Organizations like the Kenya Power and Lighting Company developed their communication to include areas like internal communication while Kenya Shell

developed a wide range of corporate social responsibility programs in areas such as environmental conservation and philanthropy (Blankson, 2009).

In present-day Kenya, most local private businesses have continued to recognize the need for Public Relations in order to build lasting relationships with their publics.

According to Mbeke (2009), most corporate organizations in Kenya today are recognizing Public Relations as an indispensable tool in the all-important process of building relationships with their key publics. While public organizations like government agencies maintain internal public relations personnel, it is private businesses that mostly seek out additional external services from Public Relations agencies, ostensibly to boost the efforts of their internal Public Relations team.

2.2.2 Internet

The Internet was originally developed in the 1960s at the US Defence Department by a group of researchers headed by Dr. Robert W. Taylor. The Internet spread rapidly across the globe and grew to one million users in 1992 (Falk, 1994; Giovannetti, Kagami & Tsuji, 2003). The Internet began impacting on ordinary lives only in the late 1990s, with the development of the World Wide Web (Gillies & Cailliau, 2000; Giovannetti *et al.*, 2003). Since then, the Internet has been used extensively for accessing instantaneous information and communicating across geographical boundaries.

Due to its characteristic speed, efficiency and economy, the Internet began to be applied increasingly across industries ranging from retail and banking to the media

(Giovannetti *et al.*, 2003). The emergence of social media in the new millennium gave the World Wide Web a new name, 'Web 2.0' (Breakenridge, 2008). Though social media has various definitions, in essence, it is a medium for people to collaborate and share content via Internet tools ranging from video-sharing, photo-sharing and blogs to social networking websites, virtual worlds and micro-blogs (Mersham, Theunissen & Peart, 2009). Seitel (2001) cites British futurist, Peter Cochrane, who, in 1998, predicted what the world was heading towards in the 21st century by saying, "If you are not online, you don't exist."

It is beyond doubt that since the last decade, the Internet has evolved faster than any other communication channel and has dynamically changed our lives and professions.

Africa is the world's second-largest and second most-populous continent after Asia. At about 30.2 million km² (11.7 million), including adjacent islands, it covers 6% of the earth's total surface area and 20.4% of the total land area. The Internet in Africa is limited by a lower penetration rate when compared to the rest of the world. Moreover, Africa itself exhibits an inner digital divide, with most Internet activity and infrastructure concentrated in South Africa, Morocco and Egypt.

Kenya is well positioned compared to most other African countries. Kenya is already an outward looking nation and one of the sub-Saharan Africa's largest exporters, e.g. Kenya is the world's largest exporter of tea and cut flowers. Therefore, the notion of exporting services and products is not a new one to Kenyan businessmen and entrepreneurs. Furthermore, Kenya has one of Africa's highest literacy rates. Relative to its size, the most secondary and tertiary graduates in the region, and the country's subscription to a relatively developed form of capitalism since

independence mean good access to qualified, trainable and Information Technology (IT)-exposed employees.

The Kenyan Information Communication Technology (ICT) sector is still in its infant stages, though opportunities are arising. The government and the private sector are working quite harmoniously towards ensuring that Kenya has the necessary infrastructure, human resources, legal framework and access to finance in order to achieve the goal for the sector to contribute one fifth of the country's export. Large investments in a countrywide fibre network as well as fast developments in the mobile information technology sector underlines this trend.

Finally, the literacy rate in Kenya is among Africa's finest and there is access to qualified, trainable and IT-exposed employees. Most companies in the Kenyan ICT industry are quite optimistic about the future of the industry and the country's utilization of ICTs. The numbers of mobile subscribers have more than doubled the past two years, the use of Short Messaging Services (SMS) has almost tripled, and Internet usage is growing steadily.

2.2.3 Internet and Public Relations

The practice of Public Relations is one such profession that has considerably been affected by the Internet revolution (Phillips, 2001). PR is one of the most important tasks marketing has to perform. Public Relations and Internet medium can have a strong influence on the image of an organization among other publics. When using technology in PR through the Internet, the goal should be focused on getting the job done quickly and as easy as possible. This is one of the rare situations where

organizations can simultaneously perform better and at a lower cost with the use of Internet related technologies, the costs of reaching publics are much lower than classical ways of communication.

The Internet offers several advantages when compared to the other media such as speed of communication, almost immediate product delivery, interactivity, customization and personalization; it can improve productivity, efficiency and issues management. The Internet also provides an ideal forum for group communication and interaction (Ashcroft, 2001; Macintosh, 2000; Sallot, 2004). It has dramatically changed the way Public Relations practitioners distribute information, interact with key publics, deal with crises, and manage issues (Hallahan, 2004). Studies examining the extent of the Internet's usage in Public Relations date back to the late 1990s.

At the time, an independent Los Angeles based Public Relations agency called 'The Bohle Company' published a report that included results of a survey of 334 American practitioners. The results stated that 95% of the respondents used e-mail extensively (The Bohle Company, 1998), suggesting that e-mail had already become commonplace in the practice. Around the same period, Esrock and Leighty (1999) examined a sample of 100 websites drawn from the list of Fortune 500 companies in the US. He found that 90% of the companies had a website. Moreover, the majority of them were targeted at the investors, customers and the media. It was further identified that while the websites attempted to target the media, they failed to include media contacts and search tools,. This made it difficult for reporters to locate information.

Since then, the Internet has been used extensively for accessing instantaneous information and communicating across geographical boundaries. Due to its characteristics of speed, efficiency and economy, the Internet began to be applied

increasingly across industries ranging from retail and banking to the media for publicity sake (Giovannetti *et al.*, 2003). It is beyond doubt that since the last decade, the Internet has evolved faster than any other communication channel and has dynamically changed our lives and professions in the world.

The impact of the Internet on Public Relations has been subject to considerable discussion in the existing literature but the scope of the research has largely been limited to assessing the use of e-mails and websites in the Public Relations functions of media relation and crisis communication. The overall observation regarding the application of the Internet by Public Relations practitioners is that they tend to apply the online tools in a fashion similar to traditional media tools such as print and broadcast and fail to include the Internet in their strategic planning process.

Several advantages of the Internet have been identified which include reduced costs, enhanced speed, customization and direct contact with the target publics. Yet, practitioners participating in earlier studies have expressed concern over several challenges. These include the accentuation of crisis due to the globalized networking on the Internet and the difficulty in keeping up to date with the constantly evolving Internet world.

Contemporary Public Relations practitioners are confronted by a changing media environment that is significantly more complex, diverse and dynamic than the traditional media sphere. This trend requires them to share information in a far more transparent and interactive manner than ever before. The implication for the practitioners is to acknowledge and understand the changing demands and

perspectives of their publics and fully utilize the opportunities offered by the new media channels.

The Internet has created the ultimate “global village,” and completely changed news distribution to the world, allowing people to access information at any time and stay updated minute-by-minute (Hiebert, 2004). Newspapers and television once dominated as the choice media for information flow. However, the Internet now offers equal access for all interested in disseminating information. With equal access and the free flow of information, the Internet supports a true democracy unlike any other medium before it. Hiebert (2004) argues that people around the world have used cell phones and the Internet to organize rallies and protests. He states that the Internet offers a forum for debate, as witnessed by the numerous opinions and political views that buzzed on the blogosphere during the 2004 US presidential election.

Heibert (2004) further observes that the Internet forces companies, organizations and government administrations to approach the information flow with a new sense of transparency. The global reach of online media makes it particularly useful for Public Relations practitioners. According to Kirat (2007), “Online is a major medium that PR practitioners should use efficiently and rationally for effective Public Relations” (p. 170). Kirat (2007) conducted a Website analysis to assess online Public Relations. He proposes that the integration of Internet tools into contemporary Public Relations practices is necessary for success. Once Public Relations practitioners embrace the power of the Internet, it changes the way practitioners do their jobs.

Gregory (2004) argues that, “The advent of the Internet and electronic communication has transformed Public Relations, just as it has transformed many areas of

organizational and business life” (p. 245). Organizations conduct business almost entirely online in some cases, and rely on the ability to communicate instantly to meet their goals. Gregory (2004) created a framework for the Public Relations process in which the Internet exists as an important component when implementing a communications campaign. Gregory reviewed XML (eXtensible Mark-up Language), a language that allows computer hardware and software to communicate regardless of the type. She focused on XPRL (the Public Relations specific version of XML) and how it might benefit the industry. To support her ideas that successful Public Relations follow a specific process, the author developed a schematic that showed the communication campaign process. Among the implementation techniques, online is considered an integral component.

After integrating Internet tools into the communications campaign, industry professionals need to evaluate how instant and directed communication affects the message.

The Internet allows messages to travel much faster, and while the ability to disperse information quickly offers Public Relations professionals’ faster communication avenues, the ever-changing information stream requires constant monitoring and response. Gregory and Hallahan (2004) argue that Public Relations professionals need to coordinate with information technology professionals to protect information and supervise the organization’s online presence. The authors explain the many threats to client information such as hackers obtaining privileged information when Public Relations firms store that information on computers and Internet software applications. Critics or attackers have an open forum on the Internet to voice their negative opinions and are protected under the First Amendment.

Public Relations practitioners and their information technology counterparts must protect that information and the relationship between the firm and the client. The relationship between a firm and its client is very important, and the relationship between that client and its target publics is paramount. The Web has changed the way organizations build relationships with their publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Public Relations is no longer a one-way conversation, it is a constant dialogue between an organization and its audience. Even in the late 1990s, it was predicted that the Internet would improve relationships between an organization and its target publics. With all of its benefits, the Internet has created some interesting challenges for communication professionals.

Target publics are easier to reach through the Internet, but “due to fragmentation, complexity, time constraint and interactivity of computer communication, corporations may be unable to carefully package their message and make it consistent across all media channels” (Ihator, 2001, p. 200). Maintaining the original message structure across the Internet is difficult with numerous application choices and a fragmented audience.

Public Relations practitioners lose the ability to target messages to a specific audience when the audience shifts and evolves based on the daily online community. Communication professionals must produce creative, innovative and consistent digital messages that successfully represent the brand regardless of the intended audience.

Social networking websites constitute innovative digital tools. Sites such as Facebook, Myspace and LinkedIn are a common means by which people stay connected. As Dwyer, Hiltz and Passerini (2007) note, these sites are “the root motivation in

communication and maintaining relationships” (p. 1). Since Public Relations is the practice of managing relationships, social networking sites are an excellent means to managing numerous relationships at once and communicate with the public. Dwyer, Hiltz and Passerini (2007) have surveyed 69 Facebook users and 48 Myspace users to ascertain their beliefs about online privacy and trust. The authors found that respondents required more trust when they were face-to-face with someone than they did in their online relationship. In addition, Facebook users feel safer than Myspace users. The discussion applies further by defining trust between the users on these sites.

The authors discussed that an online relationship strengthens after the use of other communication methods such as in person or over the telephone. The results showed that despite the lack of trust and guarantee of privacy, social networking site users actively cultivate online relationships. The trust level between two people in the virtual world is less rigid than in a real world relationship. This raises an interesting concern for Public Relations firms. Do target publics trust a relationship that is built online, or do they require face time? Social networking site users do not always trust the information they get from other users, however they are willing to build online relationships with these users in the face of that distrust.

Social networking sites also provide numerous options for targeting specific individuals (Chester & Montgomery, 2008). As social networks begin to hyper target consumers for advertising firms by providing a comprehensive profile of each user, Public Relations professionals may choose to access this information and target campaigns to specific demographics. Not only do social networks help organizations focus only on their target audience, but they also provide a powerful tool – word of

mouth. The messages from a person's social network are more effective than a message directly from an organization.

Digital Public Relations media such as blogs allow Public Relations professionals to connect with their publics in an unprecedented way. "Blogs can provide an entrée for organizations into previously private realms" directly connected to targeted publics (Kent, 2008, p. 35). Kent's (2008) analysis of blogs showed their value in research and issue framing. With research as an essential component in Public Relations, blogs offer an opportunity for information collection from a targeted demographic or like-minded audience. Public Relations professionals use blogs' dialogic structure to sway the opinions of targeted demographic groups toward their client. They can take advantage of the blogosphere's reaction to a certain message prior to that message reaching the mainstream media and use that as an opportunity to re-frame a concept if needed.

Blogs also work well to create an open-book persona for large corporations. They "afford organizations another route for sharing their positions in a somewhat controlled fashion and many mainstream organizations have taken advantage of the medium" (Kent, 2008, p. 36). but they are also open discussions with little regulation (Kent, 2008). One comment on a blog post may or may not be the opinion of the public, and should not be trusted as a general population view. Just as blogs offered a new communication method for organizations, tools that followed such as Facebook and RSS expanded communication abilities.

Godwin-Jones (2003) describes different Web generations. First generation Web consisted of email, text-based chat and chat rooms. Second generation Web consists

of RSS, wiki and blogs. Just as one generation built on another, recent applications continue to build on their predecessors.

2.3 Situating the Study within the Field of Communication Studies

This section situates the study of opportunities and constraints of Internet as PR platform within the field of communication studies. It highlights the background communication and the Internet with its relation to communication studies, the overall impacts of Internet on PR activities, and opportunities and challenges presented by Internet to organizations and individuals for the purposes of communication.

To begin, communications studies is a dynamic fields and it has been called the most practical of the academic discipline. Communication studies focuses on studying communication in relationships that can range from interpersonal which takes the form of a face to face communication between two or more individuals. The source and receivers in this form of setting are within each others' physical presences, while individual/ Intrapersonal takes place within an individual inner self conversation. Group communication and organizational communication have similar features because individuals with common interests and goals communicate in an institutional setting. The source in this setting is one or more individuals as can the receivers. A variety of channels are available for use here. Mass communication is another aspect of communication where a complex organization with the aid of one or more channels produce and transmit public messages that are directed at large, heterogeneous scatted audiences.

All these forms communication can take place within organisations and institutions because large or small institutions have a diverse forms and channels of communication. Public Relations is another aspect of communication experienced within organizations. It is the form of communication which involves a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication as its principal tools.

2.3.1 Internet and Public Relations in Communication Studies

The growth of the internet and the World Wide Web has further blurred the boundaries between communicators in any context. The computers have redefined many of the features of communication in general. More people are communicating by means of mechanically assisted platforms that allow the source and receivers to exchange information. The internet has can also extent the range of messages by amplifying it and transmitting it over large distance

The Internet has provided and improved the means for communication among individuals and organizations making it one of the most successful medium of reaching the audience. The role of communication in the modern workplace has been the focus of many discussions in the past. The purpose of organizational

communication has shifted from a one-way publicity model as described earlier by Gruing and Gruing (1989), to a two-way symmetrical communication paradigm.

The internet presents a platform where people and organizations can communicate through Internet-based platforms where people and organizations are able to engage each other by communicating and sharing information through websites, emails and social media. The internet has developed into a reality that modern communicators cannot ignore.

Communication is about the management of relationships while contributing directly to the bottom line of the organizations overall goals. With the changing dynamics, PR specialists have to secure the expertise of modern social communication strategists including bloggers, Internet specialists, and social media experts to continue maintaining organizations' positive image. Organizations can invest in communication dynamic platforms provided for by the Internet such as social media to boost their PR functions and enabling the PR experts to create a strong rapport that would benefit the organization. Some of the aspects that organizations can learn include full integration of the firms' structures with the PR functions, facilitating user co-creation of PR messages, creation of perpetual vigilance, and hyper-localizing PR activities.

2.3.2 Review of Literature Related to the Research Objectives

This section presents an empirical review of literature on the topics of Internet and Public Relations. The review focuses on the overall impacts of Internet on PR

functions, opportunities and challenges, and related theories associated with Internet, PR and communication.

2.3.2.1 Overall Impact of Internet Use on PR Practice in Organisations

The impact of the Internet on the practice of Public Relations has been subject to considerable discussion in the existing literature.

Much has been written about the communication revolution brought about by the Internet and the implications thereof for the Public Relations practitioner. It has been argued by Castells (2000) that while there are wide disparities in the penetration of the Internet with North America leading the globe with 77.4% of its population using the Internet (<http://www.Internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>), the medium itself has had more impact on society and organisations than previously invented communication channels like the television or the radio. According to Castells (2000), since the consumers of the Internet are also the producers, it leads to unprecedented decentralization of information and power. Castells (2000) refers to the Internet as the computer mediated communication (CMC) network that enables interactivity and states, "...they will extend the controlling logic of major public and private organisations into the whole realm of communication" (p. 385).

Castells' (2000) view is corroborated by Holtz (2002) and Lattimore *et al.* (2004), who argue that the organizations now operate in an information economy as opposed to an industrial one, and this causes a change in the traditional Public Relations practices that were rooted in a top-down approach. Expanding on the characteristics of the Internet that have caused the aforementioned change, Holtz explains that as a result of the Internet, people across the globe have become part of a networked

society whereby time and distance have lost their meaning. This indicates that communication has shifted from the 'one-to-many' to the 'many-to-many' concept where the underlying assumption is that the information is no longer controlled by the organisation but easily accessible and readily shared.

Middleberg (2001) further argues that the speed of the Internet and the networking of the users create the need for an instant response, the lack of which can damage an organisation's reputation. But the need for speed should not negatively affect the quality of the content the second trait of the Internet era as identified by Holtz (2002).

It has been noted that traditionally, the practice of Public Relations has mirrored the mass-production and distribution approach of conventional organisations, whereby a single press release was distributed among as many media outlets as possible to ensure maximum coverage in terms of column centimetres in print and air time in broadcast media (Holtz, 2002; Lattimore *et al.*, 2004; Broom, 2009).

This form of Public Relations, which focused on the quantity of coverage, has been referred to by Grunig and Hunt (1984) as the 'press-agentry' model. In it the sole purpose of the practitioner was to maximize the publicity for the organisation. It is argued that as opposed to simply providing newsworthy information to the media, the Internet has made it inevitable for the practitioners to focus on the quality of the content and assuring the publics that the information being disseminated is honest, accurate and credible (Phillips, 2001).

It is further suggested that instead of distributing endless press releases, practitioners increasingly need to concentrate on creating more targeted and well-placed messages,

as according to Holtz (2002), the third attribute of the Internet age is that it demands customization of information. Holtz (2002) strongly argues that the Henry Ford car analogy of one-size-fits-all does not apply to Public Relations anymore and he exemplifies the same while citing futurist and author Watts Wacker says:

The PR industry has to recognize that the world is that different and let go the way it is used to doing things and apply a beginner's mind. In a life of complete media centrality-beyond media saturation-everyone feels they could and should be marketed to as an individual. If I can customize my computer online, or my blue jeans or my loafers, I certainly expect I should receive custom-made messages (p. 28).

The fourth and final characteristic of the information age, as defined by Holtz (2002), is that as opposed to the producer-driven industrial age, we now live in an era where the 'consumer is the king'.

According to Holtz (2002), the consumers in the information age are more aware and demanding. Therefore, their satisfaction has become the key to organizational success. The aforementioned view implies that Public Relations practitioners need to break away from the more traditional 'information dissemination' and 'two-way asymmetrical' models of Public Relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The objective was to disseminate controlled organisational messages or to indulge in discussion that was more persuasive in nature and increasingly adopt the 'two-way symmetric' model that emphasizes the importance of balanced engagement to build long lasting relationships with the target publics.

It has been further argued that the Internet has empowered the publics and they choose the information they want to receive and also the source from where they will accept it (Phillips, 2001; Grunig, 2009). Additionally, they prefer sources that reflect their lifestyle and engage globally with people who have similar tastes (Phillips,

2001). This reflects that there is need for Public Relations practitioners to become more aware of the opinions, motivations and expectations of their publics through constant dialogue and monitoring. A statement that perfectly summarizes the above was made by practitioner and author Brian Solis, who is cited by Breakenridge (2008) as commenting, “PR 2.0 is about putting the ‘public’ back in Public Relations” (p. XX), where PR 2.0 is considered as the outcome of Web 2.0, a by-product of the Internet.

2.3.2.2 Opportunities and Challenges of Internet for Public Relations Practice

As discussed in the previous section, it has been widely acknowledged that the communication revolution has empowered the ‘publics’. This implies that while the Internet offers several opportunities to the Public Relations practitioners, it also creates challenges for them as they now operate in a non-traditional and more transparent environment that requires them to relinquish control (Phillips, 2001; Breakenridge, 2008; Broom, 2009; Grunig, 2009). It has been identified that the most important impact of the Internet on the practice is its phenomenal capability to make any kind of information available almost instantly (Christ, 2005). Breakenridge (2008) illustrates the ease of information access in the following comment:

You have the ability to be wired with knowledge from the time you wake up in the morning until the moment you fall asleep at night. There’s your home desktop computer, PDA, work computer, wireless laptop, and Apple iPhone – you can log on just about anywhere, anyplace, to find any piece of obscure information you need (p.27).

Breakenridge (2008) further explains that the instant availability of real-time information with social media tools such as Really Simple Syndication (RSS) news feeds, blogs and social networks can be used by Public Relations practitioners for research, media monitoring and issues management. This ease of information access

according to Breakenridge (2008) assists in the strategic planning of communication campaigns and in the early identification of issues which helps practitioners mitigate crisis. At the same time, it has also been argued that the speed and networking capability of the Internet act as a facilitator of crises and bring global disrepute to an organization because 'anyone' can share 'any kind' of information with 'any number' of people at a great speed (Middleberg, 2001; Holtz 2002; Alfonso & Smith, 2008, Sandilands & Mersham, 2009). To demonstrate the above views, Alfonso and Smith (2008) cite the example of Kryptonite locks. In 2004, a small blog called www.bikeforums.net published a post stating that one of Kryptonite's high-end bike locks could be unlocked using a ball-point pen. Within five days of this post, a similar one was published on a popular blog called 'Engadget'.

According to Alfonso and Smith (2008), the news of the faulty locks soon spread all over the Internet and then rippled to the mainstream media. Kryptonite, who had initially ignored the blog post, had a crisis at hand.

It has therefore been suggested that regular monitoring of the Web across various websites, blogs, newsgroups, forums and other social media becomes rudimentary for the early identification of issues so that corrective measures can be taken to avoid a crisis (Middleberg, 2001; Holtz, 2002).

Public Relations practitioners are increasingly monitoring social media such as the blogosphere. Nevertheless, their relationship with citizen journalists like bloggers remains tenuous due to their desire to maintain control over information and its dissemination (Broom, 2009). This issue is further addressed by Kent (2008) who adds that the challenge for a practitioner is that controlled messages have the risk of

being treated like propaganda in the blogosphere whereas uncontrolled messages have the possibility of being misinterpreted or inadequately placed. The blogosphere, according to Xifra and Huertas (2008), like every other social media channel, has a conversational environment and much greater interactivity is expected even in the way Public Relations practitioners communicate with bloggers.

Steyn *et al.* (2007) have studied issues related to blogging in the Asia-Pacific region. They drew a sample of 153 bloggers from the database of a global Public Relations firm called Text100. The results revealed that most of the bloggers preferred to be contacted via e-mail followed by comments on their blogs. Additionally, according to Steyn *et al.* (2007), on a Likert scale of 10 (where 10 = very interested and 1 = not interested at all) bloggers showed preference for receiving the content in the form of online videos (6.91), followed by graphs or figures (6.75). Steyn *et al.* conclude that the best way for Public Relations practitioners to strengthen their relationship with bloggers is to give them feedback on the content of their own blogs and supply them with interactive content in the form of videos and images.

Unfortunately, it has been argued that Public Relations practitioners continue to use social media just like they used traditional channels as a way to push promotional messages rather than using them to facilitate two-way symmetrical dialogue (Grunig, 2009).

While it has been noted that the blogosphere raises challenges for the practitioners it has also been observed that there is an exaggerated significance attached to bloggers as the majority of them could be criticized for poor content, infrequent posts and lack of credibility (Kent, 2008). This implies that further research is needed before any

claims can be made to ascertain the value that citizen journalists such as bloggers have for Public Relations practitioners.

The case in favour of the use of blogs by Public Relations practitioners is that if 'anyone' can publish on the net, then so can Public Relations practitioners (Holtz, 2002). It has been acknowledged that a primary advantage of the Internet is that it allows direct access to the publics via channels such as blogs, micro-blogs and other social media websites bypassing gatekeepers like the traditional media (Broom, 2009). It is advocated that organisations should be more proactive in communicating with their target publics and not wait for a crisis to occur and necessitate conversation, "...any activity, event, issue, opinion, or position that generates a press release or an effort to pitch an item to the press is a likely candidate for communication on the Internet" (Holtz, 2002, p. 343).

While it is understood that interactivity is the key in building relationships via social media, it is also observed that transparency and credibility are equally important to establish trust (Yang & Lim, 2009). This implies that practitioners need to abide by the ethical principles of the practice even while communicating with their publics online. Parson (2008) defines Public Relations ethics as, "...the application of knowledge, understanding and reasoning to questions of right or wrong behaviour in the professional practice of Public Relations" (p. 9). Professional bodies such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) in the United States, Figureered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) in the UK and the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) in New Zealand have created ethical codes of conduct to be followed by Public Relations practitioners.

According to Pratt (1991), Lieber (2005), Broom (2009) and Tilley (2009), most of the ethical codes expect practitioners to act honestly, fairly and in a socially responsible manner; maintain integrity; balance openness and privacy; check credibility and reliability before disclosing information and abide by all laws affecting the Public Relations practice. Further, Parsons (2008) argues that with the use of social media tools such as blogs in Public Relations, the ethical expectation of authorship of content, transparency and credibility have become crucial as the organisation's reputation depends on them. Smudde (2005) corroborates this view saying that when a blog is written by Public Relations practitioners, it needs to be treated like advertising content as it is primarily promotional in nature. Smudde (2005) and Parsons (2008) argue that the readers of the social media sphere expect truth and transparency, therefore lack of disclosure can lead to sudden and widespread disrepute.

Parsons (2008) explains the possible repercussions of unethical blogging with the help of the example of Wal-Mart. According to Parsons (2008), in 2006 a blog called 'Wal-Mart Across America' was launched by a middle-class American couple, who wrote about their journey across the country, whereby they stayed overnight at Wal-Mart store parking lots and visited the stores during the day. Their blog posts raved about the staff and the stores of Wal-Mart, quite contrary to the popular perception of the brand being a stingy employer. A close examination of the blog by a professor at the Colorado State University named Jonathan Rees revealed that the blog was financially supported by a Public Relations firm, on behalf of Wal-Mart, to counter the criticism it faced from labour unions (Parsons, 2008).

In a more current example, in 2009, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the US reviewed its guidelines on testimonials and endorsements; specifying that any blogger failing to disclose freebies and/or payments received to review companies will be fined \$11,000 per violation. Although these rules do not apply globally, they indicate a start towards ensuring ethical conduct. Similarly, The Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) is a US based organization that is dedicated towards advocating ethical principles of word of mouth marketing, in both the offline and online environments. The members of WOMMA are strictly required to abide by the code of ethics when operating in the social media sphere (WOMMA, 2009).

The code currently covers issues discussed earlier in this chapter such as disclosure and honesty. Though the code does not represent any legal or governmental jurisdiction, the purpose is to encourage 'self-regulation' among communications professionals to achieve the higher goal of ethical practice (WOMMA, 2009).

From the above views and examples, it can be argued that Public Relations practitioners can use the Internet to communicate directly with their publics. However, they need to conform to ethical practice to avoid bringing disrepute to the organisation they are representing. Additionally, more research is required in this area to establish theories that can be applied in a global context covering all channels of the Internet. In addition to the concern of insufficient transparency as discussed above, there are other ethical dilemmas which are characteristic to the online environment. Hallahan (2006) elaborates that the digital alteration of graphics and videos and the misrepresentation of copyrighted material are among the key ethical issues on the Internet.

It has also been suggested that Public Relations practitioners should especially refrain from sending unsolicited messages via e-mails as this practice of 'spamming' the recipient is regarded as unethical (Strenski, 1995). Moreover, there is the concern of safeguarding privacy and security of the Internet users by not engaging in acts of accessing personal data such as demographic information, credit card details and web pages visited by scanning temporary Internet 'cookies', search engines and stored online forms (Tavani, 2004).

It can be argued that the issue of online ethics requires continuous academic research and professional attention, so that the various ethical codes are reflective of the dynamic online environment. In a personal conversation with the executive director of PRINZ – P. Dryden – it was revealed that PRINZ aims to advocate ethical practice among the practitioners of New Zealand in both the online and offline environments (P. Dryden, Personal Communication, August 18, 2009). Dryden was of the opinion that while PRINZ feels that the current principles of honesty, fairness and balance between openness and privacy apply equally to the online environment, the organisation has an active ethics committee that strives to keep the code current and relevant (P. Dryden, Personal Communication, August 18, 2009).

In furtherance to Dryden's comments above, it can be suggested that self-regulation by practitioners or the presence of online ethical guidelines by organizations might have a major role to play in the challenge of complying with ethical online practice. Phillips (2001) and James (2008) argue that due to the rising challenges surrounding the effective and ethical application of the Internet tools, Public Relations practitioners need to keep abreast of the technological developments in the online arena. Practitioners need to increasingly consider how online dynamics will impact on

their knowledge and skills. James (2008) posits that practitioners will require a better understanding of the technical side of the Internet in order to successfully employ the online tools.

If new media are to be embraced, Public Relations practitioners will need more technical skill in areas such as web publishing, new software operation, online security, search engine optimization (SEO), web analytics and web trend analysis software operation (p. 142). It is further suggested that since the conversational tone of the online channels draws a complete contrast to the news release format of the traditional media, practitioners need to adapt their writing styles accordingly (Breakenridge, 2008; James, 2008). In addition to writing effectively, they also need to better understand multi-media formats such as videos and images, which according to James (2008) will presumably be used increasingly in the practice of Public Relations.

Besides the technical know-how, efficient time management is bound to become a crucial skill due to the pressure created to deliver content under the burgeoning demand for instant communication. James (2008) argues that the challenge for practitioners is to produce instant content that is expected to be accurate at the same time. In another study, Hill and White (2000) revealed that, due to the lack of sufficient time, online activities might be given less priority than 'other' routine offline tasks. Their findings were based on qualitative interviews with thirteen American practitioners who worked for organisations that had websites.

The participating practitioners felt that managing the Web was a full-time job in itself and it was difficult to manage the online activities along with the routine ones that had

greater urgency due to deadlines. Hill and White (2000) note that some practitioners felt that since the organisation's top management did not assign much value to its online activities, they tended to fall off the radar for Public Relations practitioners.

James (2008) avers that the aforementioned time pressures are likely to impact on the relationships between the Public Relations teams and their superiors in an organization or other departments such as Information Technology (IT) that are mainly responsible for facilitating technical aspects of the Internet and ensuring speediness.

James (2008) argues that Public Relations practitioners need to form better alliances with the IT department to ensure smooth running of the technical processes. On the other hand, the study by Hill and White (2000) suggests that practitioners felt that the IT teams were encroaching on their roles by controlling the management of the website. Hill and White cite Lauzen who defines encroachment as, "...the assignment of nonPublic Relations professionals to manage Public Relations function" (p. 35). According to Lauzen (1992), encroachment is inter-related to the roles that Public Relations practitioners play and the intra-organisational power held by different departments.

The two key practitioner roles are identified as that of a technician, who is responsible for the technical aspects of communications such as writing and implementing orders, and a manager, who has the authority in planning and strategic thinking (Dozier, 1992). It has been argued that if senior practitioners are not efficient in enacting their manager roles in an organisation, the department as a whole will be overpowered by other more influential departments (Dozier, 1992; Lauzen, 1992). According to

Dozier (1992), “Encroachment is the inevitable by-product of a calling that fails to rise above technique. The career failure of top practitioners to assume the management role within organisations is also a failure to truly emerge as a profession from the communication skill cluster that operationally defines what practitioners do – and what the practice is” (p. 352).

Therefore, it can be suggested that Public Relations practitioners need to strengthen their knowledge of the Internet in terms of environmental scanning, media monitoring, research and evaluation. These, according to Broom (2009), are typically assumed to fall under the manager’s role, and avoid being too involved with technician functions such as uploading content on websites, web design and search engine optimization and leave these for the IT teams to handle in order to manage encroachment. However, there is no evidence in the existing literature that could support the above deduction. Surprisingly, a study by Ryan (2003), using a sample of 200 members of the PRSA, revealed that the participating practitioners did not have any perceived encroachment issues from the IT departments. Nevertheless, they felt that they required more technical and conceptual training to keep up-to-date with the emerging online tools.

Therefore, it can be deduced that more research is required in the area to determine a conclusive relationship between encroachment, roles and the Internet and in defining the extent of technical literacy that is to be expected from a Public Relations practitioner. A related issue of encroachment as identified by Ryan (2003) could be turf wars that appear to be commonplace between the Public Relations and marketing teams in an organisation. Ryan (2003) suggests that Public Relations practitioners

might be worried about marketers vying for using the organisation's online presence to promote their marketing interests.

Although the concept of integrated communications (which involves applying advertising, marketing and Public Relations in an integrated manner to attain the larger communication objective of the organisation) is being advocated by marketing gurus such as Kotler (2003), Public Relations theorists continue to be cynical about being allied with marketing.

This is evident in a book on Public Relations practice authored by Broom (2009) where a complete section is devoted to clarifying the "confusion with marketing" (p. 26). Further, Hallahan (2007) cites Public Relations theorists Grunig and Grunig (1998) as commenting:

One major hurdle remains, however, before communications can be fully integrated: Public Relations theorists and marketing communication theorists – particularly advertising scholars – conceptualize communication in very different ways. Many marketing communications programs apply marketing communication rather than Public Relations theory to communication management...in ways that we believe do not result in effective communication (p. 310).

Evidently, from the above views, while integrated communication is being advocated, Public Relations practitioners perceive themselves as better communicators than marketers. They are cynical of sharing the online tools with their marketing counterparts. Therefore, any overlap of online responsibilities or sharing of online tools might create encroachment issues, though further research is required to establish a definite correlation.

Apart from encroachment, it is suspected by Porter and Sallot (2003) that gender discrepancies might have a relation with the roles practitioners play and their

respective use of the Internet. They tested the aforementioned hypothesis by surveying the members of PRSA and realised that it was not supported as male and female practitioners were found to be proportionally occupied in manager and technician roles and no apparent differences were observed in the way they used the Internet. Since no similar research could be identified, it is difficult to draw any valid conclusions based on the study by Porter and Sallot (2003).

Though, it can still be argued that as per other literature on Public Relations roles, gender discrepancies are not unusual in the practice (Hon, Grunig & Dozier, 1992; Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Aldoory, 2007). Therefore, any possible impact of the Internet on gender imbalances cannot be ignored.

It has been widely acknowledged that while 70% of the practitioners in Public Relations are women, men continue to be favoured to enact a manager role (Choi & Hon, 2002; Broom, 2009). This, according to Aldoory and Toth (2002), is a surprising reflection of gender imbalances in a gendered profession. It has been observed that the stereotypical perceptions of gender in the society influence the hiring decisions in the top management where presumably masculine traits such as aggression, dominance and competitiveness are preferred (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000).

There is no evidence available so far to either support or negate the proposition that the use of the Internet can help reduce the gender imbalance (if any) at the top management level. Further, it also needs to be examined whether the increased use of the Internet in the practice can aid in balancing the overall gender ratio by attracting more men. It has been argued by Ono and Zavodny (2003) that while there are no gender differences in the adoption of the Internet, men are observed to be more

frequent and intense users as compared to women. This inference is somewhat supported by a recent study conducted among a sample of 1250 New Zealanders above the age of 12 (Smith *et al.*, 2010).

The research revealed that while there were equal numbers of male and female Internet users, the male users were more engaged, especially in terms of downloading videos and participating in e-commerce and online socializing (Smith *et al.*, 2010). The above two inferences indicate that it is probable that with men being more engaged with the Internet they might be attracted to a career in Public Relations if more Internet tools were used in practice, though further research will be required to validate this proposition. It is evidenced from the discussions in this section that while the Internet offers several opportunities for the Public Relations practitioner, it also raises critical issues that require more understanding and call for extensive research.

2.4 Review of PR Models

Communication research and the PR theory that grew out of it look at the relationship between the senders of information and the receivers of it and in many ways this defines that most of PR activities – how to communicate effectively with a group. Grunig and Hunt (1984) were the first to define four typical ways in which Public Relations is practiced – four models of Public Relations. The four – press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical – describe how Public Relations is practiced in the United States. Since that time, these four models have been at the centre of intense research by Public Relations scholars. Later on, other models that could be applicable on the international arena were designed.

2.4.1 Press Agency

The press agency model has the sole purpose of gaining publicity for the organization and Public Relations officers are determined to have stories of their clients appear in the media. “The press agency model applies when a communication program strives for favourable publicity, especially in the mass media” (Grunig, 1992, p. 18). The purpose of public information model is to disseminate positive information about an organization to the media and public. “A program based on the public information model uses „journalists in residence“ to disseminate relatively objective information through the mass media and controlled media such as newsletters, brochures and direct mail” (Grunig, 1992, p. 18). Press agency and public information are one-way of Public Relations whose communication programs are not based on research and strategic planning (Grunig, 1992). Press agency is applicable to this study where organizations or individuals can communicate to their audience in one way channel from the sender to the receiver. It is made for publicity where the sender is not much interested about the second party’s feedback and reviews.

This study seeks to understand whether the communication model can help in identifying the Opportunities and challenges associated with Internet as a PR tool. The P.T. Barnum, also the Press Agency, provides a platform for evaluating this study in understanding how social media techniques operate and what Opportunities they can offer to individuals and the corporate world

2.4.2 Public Communication PR Model

Contrary to excellent Public Relations programs which emphasize on sophisticated and effective models of communication, press agency and public communication are asymmetrical models that try to make the organization look good either through propaganda or disseminating only favourable information (Grunig, 1992).

Public communication is intended to maintain as well as enhancing image of an organization/individual through circulating relevant and meaningful information within the target public/audience. In this model, PR specialists depend on recorded information including press releases, video release and news release to circulate specific brand of information. The study also focuses on the recorded media, and the impacts to the targeted audience where the PR experts embrace creativity and influence their clients/end-users. This one way communication, information flowing from sender to receiver, is limited in that it does not have better record of how the intended users react. This study also indicates that many organizations embrace public communication to create good image, a part of the larger study that provides how Internet as a PR tool is affordable to individuals and organizations.

2.4.3 Two-Way Asymmetrical Model

In the third model of Public Relations, the two-way asymmetrical model, Public Relations practitioners conduct research to identify messages that are likely to persuade the public. Public Relations officers practicing this model have the interests of their organization or client at heart and do not put into consideration the views of the public. “The two way asymmetrical is a more sophisticated approach in that it

uses research to develop messages that are most likely to persuade strategic publics to behave as the organization wants” (Grunig, 1992, p. 18).

2.4.4 Two-Way Symmetrical Model

The fourth model, the two-way symmetrical model, is geared toward building a mutually beneficial relationship between the organization and the public. According to Grunig (1992), the two-way symmetrical is considered the excellence model in Public Relations. “Two way symmetrical describes a model of Public Relations that is based on research and that uses communication to manage conflict and improve understanding within strategic publics” (Grunig, 1992, p. 18). Personal influence model (Sriramesh, 1992) describes how practitioners cultivate good relations with key publics, usually government, and journalists.

The main purpose of cultivating such interpersonal relations is to secure government approval and positive coverage from journalists. The job of the Public Relations practitioner is to perform “personal influence relations” (Sriramesh, 1992, p. 207). Socializing is one of the most important activities for a Public Relations practitioner while the best way to gain influence is to provide freebies such as holiday gifts. The cultural interpreter model was identified by Lyra (1991) based on Public Relations practice in Greece. According to Grunig et al., (1995), this model “seems to exist in organizations that do business in another country, where it needs someone who understands the language, culture, customs, and political system of the host country” (p. 182). These models provide a theoretical framework of how Public Relations is practiced globally.

2.5 Review of Related Previous Research

This section presents previous researches that were done to support the area of Internet and PR. The previous researches can be in supportive or against the expended findings in this study. The previous researches are made to inform what other studies have found about Internet and PR and what is good or needs improvement. This section is expected to inform the reader on what Internet has provided to individuals and organizations on matters communication and PR to the target audiences.

Studies examining the extent of Internet usage in Public Relations date back to the late 1990s when an independent Los Angeles based Public Relations agency called 'The Bohle Company' published a report that included results of a survey of 334 American practitioners. The results of the study showed that 95% of the respondents used e-mail extensively (The Bohle Company, 1998). This suggested that e-mail had already become commonplace in the PR practice at the time.

Around the same period, Esrock and Leighty (1999) examined a sample of 100 websites drawn from the list of Fortune 500 companies in the US and found that 90% of the companies had a website and the majority of them were targeted at the investors, customers and the media. It was further identified that while the websites attempted to target the media, they failed to include media contacts and search tools, making it difficult for reporters to locate information. Esrock and Leighty (1999) suggest that it is likely that the websites were not managed by Public Relations practitioners but by technical or marketing staff and therefore were not efficient at servicing media requirements. They used the same assumption to explain why the websites were not used to proactively engage with the publics but only as a medium

of information dissemination similar to traditional channels such as print and broadcast.

Since Esrock and Leighty (1999) never presented evidence in their study to validate the view that Public Relations practitioners were not involved in managing the websites, it cannot be completely ruled out that the practitioners themselves might have been unsure of how best to utilize websites. The ineffective use of websites as revealed in the study by Esrock and Leighty could be attributed to the fact that websites were still relatively new concepts as the Web itself had developed post 1995.

Therefore, it is likely that the top management of organizations and Public Relations practitioners at that time had not completely identified the Web's scope as a medium for the ideal two-way symmetrical communication advocated by theorists such as Grunig (1992). A study by Thorsteinsson (2000) to assess whether the Internet could facilitate two-way symmetrical communication interviewed four Public Relations practitioners from the UK and Iceland and one tutor from Manchester Metropolitan University. The results revealed that while the practitioners acknowledged the possibility of using the Internet for asymmetrical communication models press-agentry, information dissemination and two-way asymmetrical, they could not comprehend how it could be used to facilitate symmetrical dialogue with their publics (Thorsteinsson, 2000). His study evidenced that practitioners at that time felt that they lacked the fundamental understanding of the Internet as a medium of communication and what implications it held for their practice (Thorsteinsson, 2000). It can be argued that the small sample size of the above study acts as a considerable limitation in the generalization of the results.

Though, a study conducted in the UK that covered a wider sample of senior Public Relations practitioners across the country validates the interpretations made by Thorsteinsson (2000).

This study cited by Stuntebeck (2002) was conducted by the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) in 1997 and found that while 89% of practitioners agreed that the Internet will affect communications/Public Relations, 26% were still undecided about its impact on media relations and 30% felt that there had been no impact at all. Media relations entails maintaining relationships with the media to gain support for one's organisation (Lattimore *et al.*, 2004) and is widely acknowledged to be an important Public Relations function (Wilcox *et al.*, 2000; Lattimore *et al.*, 2004; Broom, 2009).

The fact that practitioners were undecided about how the Internet impacted on media relations suggests that they were possibly unsure about the value of the Internet during this time. In addition, the results of a research by Taylor and Perry (2005) who conducted a series of four studies in 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2003 to examine how organisations used the Internet for crisis communication revealed that practitioners were equally uncertain of the value of the Internet for this function of Public Relations. They drew their sample of 1992 crises by monitoring US based news channels – CNN and MSNBC. According to Sandilands (2009), crisis communication in Public Relations implies:

...swiftly coordinating the organisation's response, advising and training spokespeople, often being the spokesperson, managing the critically important media liaison, keeping a close eye on public reaction and opinion, to orchestrating communication with a wide range of publics like investors, clients, employees and at times, angry or grieving members of the public (p. 105).

The Internet can both facilitate or trigger a crisis as well as aid in mitigating or managing one (Middleberg, 2001; Holtz 2002; Alfonso & Smith, 2008; Breakenridge, 2008; Sandilands, 2009). This explains why PR is a critical factor in crisis communication. In contrast, the study by Taylor and Perry (2005) found that the Public Relations practitioners had not yet identified the value of the Internet in crisis communication.

It was further found that wherever the organizations included the Internet as part of their crisis communication plan, they relied on tactics such as uploading news releases and fact sheets (which have been labelled as 'traditional tactics' by the researchers), rather than using it to facilitate a two-way conversation with their target publics (Taylor & Perry, 2005).

Taylor and Perry (2005) further observed that only 22 of the total 92 organizations studied followed a two-way communication approach, with no significant increase in the number of organisations between October 1998 and October 2003. All the above studies (Esrock & Leighty, 1999; Thorsteinsson, 2000; Stuntebeck, 2002; Taylor & Perry, 2005) show that during the initial years of the Internet's usage in Public Relations, the practitioners were largely unaware of the value of the Internet and the scope of its application in the practice.

2.6 Rationale of the Study based on Literature Review

A key limitation of the above studies is that they were all executed in either the US or the UK. Therefore, they present perspectives that may not be useful to the African context. Sharif (2003) argues that a country's internal environment greatly influences

the way Public Relations is practiced and the impact of the Internet cannot be understood without taking the same into account. Sharif cites Sriramesh and Vercic who strongly believe that a country's economic and political infrastructure, the media environment and the societal conditions determine how Public Relations is practiced and affected.

In the light of the above statements, Jun (2002) notes that there is not enough international research, especially from the perspective of developing countries, that can be used to fully understand the impact of the Internet in international Public Relations. However, it was found that studies done outside the US and the UK (Jun, 2002; Sharif; 2003; Ayish, 2005) revealed trends similar to the above two countries.

In these studies, while the Internet had impacted on the practice, the practitioners had not been able to fully utilize the opportunities that the Internet provides.

Another study by Alfonso and de Valbuena Miguel (2006) has focused on the global Fortune 500 companies. The objective was to analyse the use of the Internet in the function of media relations and to identify any difference in trends among the countries included in the research (Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006). For the purpose of the study, Alfonso and de Valbuena Miguel (2006) chose 15 companies each from six European countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, Spain and the UK), the US and Singapore, amounting to 120 companies and eight countries. According to the researchers, these countries were chosen based on their high rankings in the list prepared by The Economist and International Business Machines (IBM) corporations judging their ability to use computer mediated technologies to foster their economy's growth (p. 269). According to the results, the media was

considered to be the second most important target audience after customers, with 78% of the website content uploaded to facilitate media relations, beating investors at whom 70% of the content was targeted (Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006).

This is in stark comparison to the results of an earlier study by Esrock and Leighty (1999) which showed that media was a secondary target audience to both customers and investors. In their research, Alfonso and de Valbuena Miguel (2006) also mention other Internet tools like video and audio material being uploaded onto the online media newsrooms. Nevertheless, it was noted that only 11% of the companies studied offered video files and only 7% offered audio podcasts. To Alfonso and de Valbuena Miguel (2006), another disappointment was the sluggishness in use of RSS feeds.

According to Eyrich *et al.* (2008), the research conducted by PRSA in 2007, surveying US Public Relations practitioners about their use of 18 pre-defined social media tools was the most recent in the area of online Public Relations. It was also the first to provide data covering the widest spectrum of Internet tools. A total of 283 practitioners completed the survey and the Internet tools studied included blogs, intranets, podcasts, video sharing (e.g. YouTube), photo sharing (e.g. Shutterbug, Flickr), social networks, wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), gaming, virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), micro-blogging/presence applications (e.g., Twitter, Pownce, Plurk), text messaging, video-conferencing, PDAs, instant message chat, social event/calendar systems (e.g., Upcoming, Eventful), social bookmarking (e.g., Delicious), news aggregation/RSS, and e-mail (Eyrich *et al.*, 2008, p. 413).

The results revealed that PR practitioners have evidently adopted the more established Internet tools like e-mail (used by 96.1% of the practitioners surveyed which is

reflective of society at large and resonating with studies discussed earlier) and Intranets (68.2%). They are also comfortable with other social media tools like blogs (41.7%) and podcasts (35.2%). These trends attest to the progress in the adoption of various tools when compared to data presented in an earlier study by Lindic (2006). The two studies, however, cannot be compared unconditionally as Lindic (2006) drew his data from global companies whereas the PRSA research cited by Eyrich *et al.* (2008) only refers to the American practitioners.

Eyrich *et al.* (2008) cite the PRSA research findings which suggest that practitioners are slow in adopting social media tools that are technologically advanced and/or cater to a niche audience. These tools include virtual worlds (6.7%) and gaming (3.1%) and have been titled as “fringe tools” (p. 414).

According to Eyrich *et al.* (2008), the results also show that some tools like social networks (24%) which are becoming increasingly important due to attention given to them by professional development programmes in Public Relations, but are not yet widely used and therefore remain in the “middle ground” (p. 414). However, once again, this research only provides an American perspective. Moreover, like Lindic’s (2006) study, it does not examine the challenges such as lack of training, newness of the channels and lack of management support that might be responsible for the laggardness in the adoption of social media.

2.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented a review of theories used in the study and literature related to Internet use in PR activities. The chapter began by examining key concepts related to the study, giving attention to the opportunities and challenges of the Internet as PR platform especially in organisations. The next section reviewed some theories and models that were found relevant to the study. This was followed by a review of related studies. The literature review revealed that some research has been conducted on Internet use in PR. However, a major gap is that most of the studies have been conducted outside Africa, mainly in the US and the UK.

Table 2.1: Table on Key Issues Emerging from Literature Review

Topic	Key Issue Covered
1. Definition of key concepts and terms in the study	Some key concepts like Public Relations (PR), Internet, and PR and Internet applications in organizations section introduces the necessity of why the individuals and organizations need to embrace Internet as a PR tool and presents some few studies. There is positive impact of using Internet for PR activities.
2. Situating The Topic Within The Field Of Communication Studies	Here the topic of Internet and PR is interconnected to Communication Studies . Placing PR and Internet in the context of Communication Studies present the need of undertaking the study and explaining why it was undertaken under the Communication studies. One topic introduced is Review of Literature related to the Research objective where the study is supported by previous studies on the topic of Internet and PR functions. Here, the areas covered and not adequately covered are exposed. The subtopic takes into consideration the Kenyan context of the studies conducted on PR and Internet. Overall Impact of Internet use for PR practice in organizations as a topic discusses the impacts of using Internet for PR purposes in organizations. This pinpoints the need to focus on social media to increase target audience of an organization. Opportunities and challenges of Internet for Public Relations practice presents the opportunities and the challenges Internet poses to organizations when used for PR functions.
3. Review of Related Theories	PR Theories and Models are introduced to support the process of embracing Internet as an enabler for PR functions. PR Models are presented that support how Internet and PR functions are related. The four models, press agency, public information, two way asymmetrical, and two way symmetrical are used to explain how Internet and PR enhance organizational communication.
4. Review of Related Previous Research	This section presents previous research conducted on the area of Internet and PR. It highlights the need for further studies to provide supporting information on the topic. It pinpoints the need to localize the application of Internet on the PR functioning on the Kenyan contexts. The section highlights gaps on why there needs supportive information on the Opportunities and challenges of using Internet for PR functions.
5. Summary	The summary presents what has been addressed in the chapter and a rationale on why the study is important to the Kenyan context.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the research methodology used in examining the opportunities and constraints of Internet use in Public Relations practice in Kenya. The chapter begins by discussing the overall research design, beginning with the research philosophical paradigm, research approach and the research method. The chapter also describes the population, sample and sampling techniques, data generation and analysis techniques. This chapter also describes the quality control as well as the measures used to ensure trustworthiness. Finally, the chapter provides a description of the ethical considerations observed in the study.

3.2 Research Design

According to Mason (2002), a research design is an overall methodological plan that the study assumes in order to meet its objective. It explains the correlation between the research paradigm, research approach, research methods, sampling and data generation techniques. Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) describe the research design as the overall plan which is the representation of the link between philosophical paradigm, approach, methods, data generation, data analysis and discussion adopted for a particular study. This study adopted a qualitative-interpretivist multiple case study research design as explained below.

3.2.1 Research Philosophical Paradigm

This study was approached from the relativist-interpretivist research paradigm. Paradigms are models or frameworks that are derived from a worldview or belief

system about the nature of knowledge and existence. Research paradigm in research context is also referred to as the philosophical underpinning which describes the system of views which researchers use to generate knowledge. A research paradigm is a set of beliefs that guide actions in research.

A philosophical paradigm, according to Slevitch (2011), is a general orientation about the world and the nature of knowledge that the researcher holds. Paradigms represent various ways of looking at the world, which involves selecting different approaches to observe and describe the phenomenon under study. Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) assert that a philosophical paradigm is essentially a researcher's outlook of the world comprising of how this world is interpreted.

In this study, the philosophical paradigm guided the research process because most research work was grounded within a philosophical underpinning. Qualitative and quantitative research approaches are rooted in philosophical traditions with different epistemological and ontological assumptions (Slevitch, 2011). Epistemology is the theory of knowledge and the assumptions and beliefs that people have about the nature of knowledge. How do researchers know the world? What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known? Ontology, on the other hand, concerns the philosophy of existence and the assumptions and beliefs that we hold about the nature of being and existence. The study focused on the epistemology of Internet and the PR and how they influence organizations and individuals in establishing and maintaining positive image.

Many researchers are guided by these philosophical suppositions, ontology and epistemology positions. Ontology is conceptualized as the nature of reality or the

assumption that one has about reality which are mainly perceived to have two extremes, the objective reality and the subjective reality. The objective and subjective realities are the ontological positions which are termed as realism and relativism. The realist views the world as an objective unit governed by rules and regulations which proposes that there is an objective truth (Jwan, 2010). In this case, the researcher seeks to find out the objective truth in the process of conducting a research.

While the relativists take a subjective position of the view of the world, here relativists look at the world as a creation of one's own mind. Jwan (2010) points out that "reality is internal to, depended on the individual's perception and experience; it is not only that which is perceived, but that which is interpreted by the individual" (p. 55).

Epistemology is concerned with the nature and forms of knowledge (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). Epistemological assumptions are concerned with how knowledge can be created, acquired and communicated; in other words what it means to know. Slevitch (2011) explains that epistemology asks the question, what is the nature of the relationship between the would-be knower and what can be known? Slevitch (2011) outlines four worldviews in research as post-positivism, constructivism, advocacy, participatory and pragmatism. The most common epistemological positions are positivism and constructivism. Consequently, the ontological positions of realism and relativism are consistent with epistemological viewpoint of positivism and constructivism respectively (Jwan, 2010).

Positivists claim there is a single objective reality that can be observed and measured without bias using standardized instruments. Interpretive constructionists, accept that

there is a reality but argues that it cannot be measured directly, only perceived by people, each of whom views it through the lens of his or her prior experience, knowledge, and expectations. That lens affects what people see and how they interpret what they find. What we know, then, is not objective; it is always filtered through people, always subjective.

For the positivists, the goal is a universal truth, a rule or explanation that is always true so long as specified conditions hold. Positivist methodology is directed at explaining relationships. Positivists attempt to identify causes which influence outcomes.

Interpretivist constructionist seeks to explain what they have seen, regardless of whether their findings can be extended beyond the time and circumstances of the current study (MacBride & Janssen-Lauret, 2015).

The research focused more on understanding what has happened in a specific circumstance than on trying to predict what will happen next. The ontological position of interpretivism is relativism (Bowers, 2011). Relativism is the view that reality is subjective and differs from person to person. Our realities are mediated by our senses and without consciousness the world is meaningless. Reality emerges when consciousness engages with objects which are already pregnant with meaning (MacBride & Janssen-Lauret, 2015). Reality is individually constructed; there are as many realities as individuals. Language does not passively label objects but actively shapes and moulds reality (Bowers, 2011). Thus, reality is constructed through the interaction between language and aspects of an independent world.

The interpretive epistemology is one of subjectivism which is based on real world phenomena. The world does not exist independently of our knowledge of it (Tai & Ajjawi, 2016). Knowledge and meaningful reality are constructed in and out of interaction between humans and their world and are developed and transmitted in a social context. Therefore, the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of individuals who are participating in it (Tai & Ajjawi, 2016). Interpretivism aims to bring into consciousness hidden social forces and structures. Interpretive methodology is directed at understanding phenomenon from an individual's perspective, investigating interaction among individuals as well as the historical and cultural contexts which people inhabit.

Every paradigm is based upon its own ontological and epistemological assumptions. Since all assumptions are conjecture, the philosophical underpinnings of each paradigm can never be empirically proven or disproven. However, different paradigms inherently contain differing ontological and epistemological views; therefore, they have differing assumptions of reality and knowledge which underpin their particular research approach which is reflected in their methodology.

The study adopted a relativist-interpretivist research paradigm. This position was taken in approaching the study from a relativist ontological position which entails an interpretivism epistemological understanding to knowledge mainly because the interpretivism methods of research starts from the position that the knowledge of reality, especially in the human actions is a social construction by human actors including the researchers. Therefore, there is no objective reality which can be discovered by researchers and replicated by others in contrast to the assumptions of positivists' science (Bowers, 2011).

The study was based on relativist ontological position and an interpretivism epistemological paradigm. In this study, knowledge was generated from the participants' views, perceptions of the use of Internet for PR activities. Participants were interacted with through in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis with experienced and knowledgeable people in the organization. The interest was to gain deeper understanding of meaning organizations have constructed on Internet use as PR platform and how they perceive and make sense of their organizations and the experiences they have.

3.2.2 Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative Research approach was adopted because the study was aimed at addressing various aspects of Internet use as PR platform in organizations.

Qualitative research is a means of exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem (Dowling, Lloyd & Suchet-Pearson, 2016). Through this approach the study aimed at addressing questions that are concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of people's lives (Venkatesh, Brown & Sullivan, 2016). This approach focuses entirely on texts, images and sounds.

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible (Bailey, 2014). These practices transform the world. They then turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photography, recordings and memos to self (Barnham, 2015). At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that

qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

Therefore, it was appropriate to use qualitative research approach because this approach examines the subjective opinions, experiences and feelings of individuals and thus the main aim of the study was to explore the participants' views of opportunities and challenges of Internet use as a PR platform. These views were subjective as they were based on the personal experiences and feelings of the respondents on the opportunities of the Internet for PR.

The approach was also in line with the philosophical paradigm of relativist-interpretivist paradigm, it involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world (Kahlke, 2014).

The qualitative inquiry is consistent with Interpretivism as interpretive-constructivist-qualitative approach is an approach to inquiry that emphasizes a naturalistic search for relativity in meaning, multiplicity of interpretations, particularly, detail and flexibility in studying a phenomenon or the aspects (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011, p. 3). This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Barnham, 2015). Therefore views were sought from the participants' inside the organization in order to understand the phenomenon under study.

3.2.3 Case Study Research Method

A case study method and, specifically, a multiple case study of selected organizations in Kenya was adopted, because it is believed that understanding the chosen case leads to a better understanding and theorizing of a larger collection of cases (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). Data in case studies were drawn from people's experience and expertise, which allows the researcher to show the complexity of real life circumstances (Kahlke, 2014). This study sought to have an in-depth understanding of the selected cases because all case studies' investigations originate from a compelling feature of understanding a case in its real context.

In this study, multiple cases of selected organizations were chosen; participants in these organizations were interviewed on the issue surrounding the topic under interrogation. The study relied on this method mainly to address the research questions the study endeavours to address. Normally, case studies are useful in providing answers to the how, why and where in this role it can be used for exploratory, descriptive or explanatory, research (Kahlke, 2014). Another reason for adopting a case study method is because case studies urge researchers to seek out what is general and unique about the chosen cases.

Since the research approach is qualitative, the researcher focused on providing a better understanding of processes and relations within a specific institutions utilizing Internet for PR activities by generating data in the natural setting, which is the purpose of this study.

3.2.4 Research Site

The research was conducted in Kenya, specifically in Nairobi where the selected organizations are based. The categories of organizations included: One financial institution, a telecommunications company, a health insurance fund, a public relations and communications agency and one online shopping business. Most of these organizations were headquartered in Nairobi. These particular institutions were targeted based on the understanding that such large institutions were most likely to have researchable PR activities. The entire organizations' PR departments were not participating in the study; the study obtained information from a few participants from the institutions management, PR professionals, marketing and advertising, information technology experts and stakeholders purposively selected to participate in the study.

3.2.4.1 Financial Institution

Majority of Kenyan banks have embarked on social and internet marketing. They target users on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other websites to market and enrol clients. The Bank Group had over 7,500 employees as of December 2015 and this applies across the East African branches. The group has a website that focuses on issues like client and investors' concerns, careers, and sponsorship among many others. The group has an ICT department that works to enhance Internet PR strategies and other related activities like managing the extensive websites and numerous online platforms like online banking. Many of the clients are embracing new technologies in banking that enable clients to access services at any place. This has helped the bank to continuously engage Internet PR to connect with its clientele and avoid disconnects due to changing technology. The staffs in the ICT department were selected,

especially those in management positions to provide critical information about the potential and dynamics of Internet PR among Kenyan organizations.

3.2.4.2 PR and Communications Agency

The Corporate Communications consultancy is a leading professional communications consultancy situated in Nairobi Kenya. The company has had continuous growth and embraced modern forms of communication such as the Internet and social media. The agency specializes in strategic communication as well as public relations on behalf of their clients. The company prides itself as “the leading independent and indigenous strategic communications agency in East Africa.” Some of its clients include KCB, Kenya Red Cross, Kenya Airways and Safaricom among others. This organization was chosen to provide insights into the choices of the PR other organizations. The company utilizes PR professionals to carry out its major functions. Other activities that the company carries out include marketing and advertising for big corporate firms in Kenya.

3.2.4.3 Online Shopping Company

The online shopping company offered a wide range of products including home appliances, fashion, kids’ items, and a range of electronics through internet-based transactions. The company also engages in Internet marketing and advertising to reach to its target publics. The company particularly had a rich experience in Internet relations, marketing and advertising, all of which made it an important choice for this study. The company has a large call centre with various professionals ranging from Public Relations, customer care and sales/marketing professionals engaging external

publics at anyone point. The study thus sought to establish the Opportunities and constraints of internet as a PR tool in this thriving online business.

The company was chosen to provide a platform for Internet interaction where clients browse for services and products and buy them from the owners or stores. It was also chosen as opposed to its market competitors such as Kilimall and OLX since it is more famous and popular with electronics buyers.

3.2.4.4 Telecommunications Company

Also included in the list of respondent organizations was a telecommunications company. This was the leading telecommunication company in Kenya with over 20 million subscribers. It serves as an internet provider for most organizations in Kenya. Therefore, studying this particular organization provided a platform of communication for different business enterprises. It has a dedicated customer service lines and social media platforms where it handles clients requests and concerns. The company uses several platforms to engage its clients, including “Live Chat”, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, Blog, Email and YouTube. This presents an opportunity where customers can relate to the company through the Internet and get services remotely without visiting the offices. The Company was selected as it is a leading force in Internet services provision, including large PR activities programmes and corporate social responsibility. The company offers corporate business communication solutions, call-in services, corporate internet, mobile data, websites and email services. It also engages in investor relations and stakeholder sustainable programmes.

3.2.4.5 Insurance Fund

The Insurance Fund is a state parastatal that was established in 1966 as a department under the Ministry of Health. The Fund's core mandate is to provide medical insurance cover to all its members and their declared dependants (spouse and children). The Fund membership is open to all Kenyans who have attained the age of 18 years and years and have a monthly income of more than Ksh 1000.

The Fund has 61 fully autonomous branches across the country. Each of these branches offers all Fund services including payment of benefits to hospitals or members or employers. Smaller satellite offices and service points in district hospitals also serve these branches. It was chosen as a good research site because it had a large PR department with many PR and communications practitioners dealing with both individual and corporate clients and stakeholders. The Insurance Fund has PR activities for both internal and external publics.

3.2.5 Population Size

The study's target population comprised the members of top management, PR and Communications experts, ICT experts and stakeholders of the five categories of organizations. In total, a sample of 45 participants was selected from the organizations. Purposive sampling techniques were used to identify the sample from the target population. This comprised 5 members of the companies' top management, 10 PR and Communications experts, 5 ICT experts and 25 stakeholders of the five categories of organizations.

According to Delice (2010), a well-conducted qualitative research is very labour-intensive; therefore, qualitative studies typically use small samples of participant. Additionally, the use of purposive sampling meant that the researcher had to look for participants who possess specific traits or qualities required for the study. In this sampling method, the researcher considered the aims of the research when selecting the sample. Using only 45 participants from these large organizations meant that the results of the study would not be generalized. Nevertheless, arguably, the results may be transferable to other similar organizations with respect to the use of Internet as PR platform.

3.2.6 Sampling

The study selected individual experts, professionals with experience in the organisations through non-probability sampling since the study is a qualitative research approach. Non-probability sampling techniques include convenience, purposive, quota and snowballing sampling techniques. In this study, purposive sampling was specifically used to identify participants of the study. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano-Clark 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979) note the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive and reflective manner.

The justification for using purposive sampling was to reach a knowledgeable population. This comprised those individuals who, based on their experience and exposure, had reliable information on the opportunities and challenges of the internet when used in PR practice. A population is a group of individuals, objects or items from which samples are taken. Population is the entity of all subjects that adapt to a set of specifications including the entire group of persons that is of concern to the researcher and to whom the research results can be generalized. Graue (2015) defines population as an entire group of persons or elements that have at least one thing in common. Through sampling, a researcher can access the people who will provide the information needed for their study. Sampling in qualitative research, according to Ong'ondo (2009), is about identification of participants who are likely to give rich and in-depth information on the issues being studied.

Wilson, Kenny and Dickson-Swift (2015) urge researchers to sample strategically the context or participants who have characteristics that suit the issues under investigations. The study was conducted in five selected organizations headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya. The respondents included the Institutions managers, PR and communication officers, marketing and advertising officers, IT officers working with the PR department and stakeholders who were represented by the institutions' key publics.

3.2.7 Sampling Frame

The table below shows the sampling frame of the study. As shown in the table, the study selected 1 respondent from top management, 2 PR and communications experts, 1 ICT expert and 5 key stakeholders from each of the five target companies. Therefore, the entire sample comprised 45 respondents, made up of 5 top management officials, 10 PR and communication experts, 5 ICT experts and 25 key stakeholders

Table 3.1: Sample Frame

Respondent	Organizations					Total
	Financial	Telecomm	Insurance	PR Agency	Online shopping business	
Management	1	1	1	1	1	5
PR and Communications experts / Customer Care services Marketing and Advertising	2	2	2	2	2	10
ICT Experts	1	1	1	1	1	5
Stake holders (key publics- internal/external customers)	5	5	5	5	5	25
Total	9	9	9	9	9	45

3.3 Data Generation Techniques and Processes

In this study, three techniques of data generation were used, namely in-depth interviews, observation and document analysis.

3.3.1 Document Analysis

Document analysis is important for almost every case study. The documents analysed included articles, news releases, newsletters, agendas, recorded interviews, etc. Document analysis was used to confirm the evidence from other sources. The general information about the organizations was obtained from the companies' websites and magazines and other materials such as printed reports. Documents from the Kenya Ministry of Information Communications and Technology (MoICT), University Library, and other organizations known for production of Internet information and statistics as well as any related information were used. The important documents were requested for addition of information into the study. They included strategic plans, periodicals, and departmental production reports on marketing, advertising and service provision. Important statistics such as the number of clients registered or having purchased a product offered through the Internet were also sought in the research. Triangulation of data collection methods helped to enrich the research findings.

3.3.2 Interviews

Interviews were used in this study to allow respondents to give insights on the Opportunities of the Internet as a PR platform. Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011), citing Oakley (1984, p. 41), point out that interviewing is rather like a marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, yet behind each closed door there is a world of secrets. Interviewing has many advantages that enable the researcher to rectify the data collected. As a researcher, it was possible to correct mistakes and clarify issues during the interviewing process.

Interview process is also associated with developing relationship between the respondent and the researcher (Bailey, 2014). It will be possible to establish a strong relationship with all selected respondents thus getting the best data from them.

Co-operation between parties would enable the establishment of the best rapport and ensure the respondents communicate and contribute at will. It also enabled the selection of the best candidates through short interviews to establish their knowledge on Internet and its significance as a PR tool among the selected organizations and individuals. Another addition to the advantages of the interviewing process is the ability to collect primary information. Focus was given to collecting fresh and new insights from the respondents thus enriching the data (Manzano, 2016).

Generally, interviewing was chosen as it is consistent with the relativist-interpretivist paradigm and the qualitative case study design. All of the interviews lasted for 20-30 minutes. The respondents were asked to give their consent to participate in the study. Letters of request to conduct interviews were presented to all the respondents and the organizations under study. Schedules were then set up. The interview proceedings were audio-recorded with the permission of the respondents. The researcher also kept notes to compliment the recordings.

The interviews were advantages as the researcher could ask any questions relating to Internet, PR, its significance and challenges to the interviewee (the respondents). They were also time-saving since the researcher only focused on the people who were knowledgeable on the topic of interest (Manzano, 2016). Moreover, interviews allow for in-depth exploration of the topic of study (Goldman & Swayze, 2012).

3.3.3 Observations

Observations were also used in this study. This method of data collection is particularly instrumental in qualitative research which seeks to study phenomena in its natural setting. This idea is supported by Bailey (2014) who states that qualitative research takes place in the natural setting and seeks to describe social phenomena as they occur naturally.

According to Singh (2010), observation is a method of data collection that demands a researcher to be physically present in the field during the process of data collection. Therefore, in this study, the researcher conducted the observations and interviews in person. An observation checklist and recordings were used with the permission of the respondents.

Observation focused on the aspects in which organizations embraced Internet in PR practices. These included activities on the companies' websites, advertisements placed on the Internet to market services and products or influence customers' purchase intentions. According to Singh (2010), observations are mostly used to record data that may not be easy to access through interviews, questionnaires or any other data collection methods.

The use of observation method was advantageous. The approach was useful in collecting information that was unadulterated by respondent biases or distortions. The researcher also observed the presence of the selected organizations online and ascertain their efficiency in producing reliable data. The challenges expected in using the observation method included not being able to see information that may have been

deleted (Singh, 2010). Moreover, it was not easy to monitor opinions and impacts of the selected social media and PR approaches using observation.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis is the deduction of meaning from the data generated from the participants through the different generation techniques. Data generated in this study included viewpoints, opinions and ideas. According to Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011), data received in qualitative studies is usually in words. The data recorded from interviews and observations was transcribed into written words. The data was then analysed thematically.

Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research to identify, analyse and report patterns within collected data (Graue, 2015). The themes captured vital data in relation to the research questions and presented some patterned response within the set of data. After working out sets of themes were presented in a write-up of the report. Thematic analysis helped to pinpoint, record and examine patterns emerging from the collected data. Categorization of important thematic areas and presentation of all supportive data was done. This approach enabled for sorting of large data set as well as expand the study past any individual experience. It also allowed for flexibility in applying other analysis approaches like content analysis especially from the documents.

From the data obtained through document analysis, replicable and valid inferences were drawn through interpreting and coding of textual materials. This was followed by a systematic interpretation of information based on the objectives of the study. I also

made comparisons of the documents from the selected three organizations to triangulate and enrich the findings. Under exploratory data analysis, the collected was used to explore any relationship between Internet and PR functions within the selected organizations in Kenya. Exploration entailed examination of trends emerging from the use of Internet on business improvement and performance for the selected organizations. The analysed data was presented using tables, graphs and by use of descriptive reports.

3.5 Trustworthiness in the Study

A pilot study was conducted to assess the trustworthiness of the study. The pilot study was conducted in a PR department of one local organization with similar characteristics as those under study. The pilot study helped to fine-tune the research instruments to ensure they generated the required data. Expert review was also done with the University supervisors who gave relevant corrections to ensure the validity of the data collection tools.

According to Lub (2015), a pilot study helps to assess the questions in the interview process and make preliminary analysis of data to answer the research questions. Therefore, trustworthiness in this study was enhanced by addressing credibility, transferability and dependability and conformability. These terms are referred to as validity, reliability and objectivity, respectively, in quantitative research as explained below.

3.5.1 Credibility

Credibility addresses the extent to which the research findings are congruent with reality. It refers to the extent to which the research conclusion makes sense. The term credibility in qualitative research is referred to as validity in quantitative research. It refers to the extent to which the study actually investigates what it claims to investigate and reports what actually occurred in the field. Țugulea (2014) argues that ensuring credibility is one of most important factors in establishing trustworthiness.

To ensure credibility, I relied on the expert advice of the University supervisors throughout the stages of the research. Triangulation of methods also helped to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study.

3.5.2 Transferability

Transferability ensures validity which is concerned with the extent to which the findings may be generalized to other cases or contexts (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010). Finfgeld-Connett defines transferability as establishing the domain to which study findings can be generalized. He suggests that validity or transferability can be ensured through replication logic in multiple case studies. In qualitative studies, the concern often lies in demonstrating that the results of the work at hand can be applied to a wider population.

Since the findings of a qualitative research are specific to a small number of particular environments and individuals, it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations and populations. However, it may be

possible to transfer some understanding more or less analytically to similar context. In this study, they are, in that sense, relevant to other cases.

3.5.3 Dependability

Dependability is the extent to which the study findings are convincing to the reader, that the study is conducted as claimed by the researcher. Qualitative researchers employ different techniques to show that, if the work were repeated, in the same context, with the same methods and with the same participants, similar results would be obtained. For instance, to ensure dependability, a clear description of the research process should be provided (Houghton *et al.*, 2013). In this study, to address the issue of dependability, the research processes were outlined and described in details.

3.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability involves the influence of the researcher on the research process and findings. The researcher ensured that she did not have undue influence on the research by her background knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, feelings, perceptions and other possible biases. The concept of confirmability is the qualitative investigator's comparable concern for objectivity (Sarma, 2015). The use of different methods of data collection helped, in part, to ensure confirmability by limiting the effects of investigator bias.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important aspects in, especially, research on human participants. Research ethics is generally the means of making sure that vulnerable individuals are offered protection from exploitation and other different forms of harm

(McLeod, Payne & Evert, 2016). They include the need for democracy, respect for truth and respect for persons. They also include a nurturing of reasonable expectations among participants in a research. The respondents were allowed to exercise their rights to make autonomous decisions and to volunteer freely to participate in the study.

Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) trigger an argument on whether the researcher should make any sort of payment or reward to the participants. They, however, emphasize that participants should not be induced into participating. In this study, participants' consent was sought without promising them anything in return. Beneficence is another ethical issue that requires a commitment to minimizing the risks associated with research, including psychological and social risks, and maximizing the benefits that accrue to research participants (McLeod, Payne & Evert, 2016). To ensure beneficence in this study, anonymity was ensured as a way of preventing any consequences that would arise as a result of revealing their identities.

Justice is another ethical consideration that requires a commitment to ensuring a fair distribution of the risks and benefits resulting from research. The researcher ensured that there was fair participation across the research activities. The people who were expected to benefit from the knowledge were the ones who are asked to participate (Ellis-Barton, 2016). To achieve the principle of conformity, participants were informed in advance to give their informed consent to participate in the study. The consent form described in details the expectations and the possible benefits of the study to all participants.

3.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the philosophical underpinning or paradigm, research approach, and research method. It has also discussed the target population, the sample and sampling techniques, data generation techniques, and data analysis and presentation procedures. The chapter has also described how trustworthiness was guaranteed in the study as well as the ethical considerations of the research.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the study findings on the first research question, namely: How does the Internet as Public Relations platform offer opportunities to organizations? The Interview data was the main data analysed while observation and document analysis was used to check for strength and validity of the information. The data is presented in expository form and respondents are quoted depending on importance and weight of the information they gave; other texts are paraphrased and summarized. Table 4.1 below gives a summary of the symbols used to represent the participants.

This chapter also presents the research findings on the second question of the study: What are the constraints of Internet as PR platforms in organisations? To answer this question, the researcher sought participants' responses on the constraints. The analysis of relevant findings generated the following themes: Difficulties while utilizing the internet platform for PR in organisations, constraints/ challenges on personalization of the Internet platform for PR, and the challenges constraints of tracking communication in the platform identified for PR. This chapter also presents the causes of problems faced while utilizing the internet for PR in organizations and the suggestions to resolve those problems.

This chapter further presents the findings of the study on the third research question: What are the perceptions on opportunities and constraints of internet as PR platform in organizations? The findings were drawn from 25 selected respondents/stakeholders

from five organizations where the researcher interviewed the key representatives. The participants included customers of the organizations studied.

Table 4.1 below gives a summary of the symbols used to represent the participants.

Table 4.1: Symbols Representing Organization and Respondents

Organization	Name and Symbol	Respondent
Financial Institution	Lion Bank-L	Ln1,2,3,4 and 5
Online Shopping	Elephant Shops-E	En1,2,3,4 and 5
Telecommunication	Rhino Telecommunications-R	Rn1,2,3,4 and 5
Insurance Fund Company	Buffalo Fund-B	Bn1,2,3,4 and 5
Communications Agency	Leopard Agency (scientific name used –Panthera Pardus)-P	Pn1,2,3,4 and 5

The study sought to ascertain the opportunities of internet as a PR platform in organizations. To achieve this objective, the study examined the overall state of utilization of the Internet as a PR platform, the opportunities (advantages) internet presents for PR, interactivity and monitoring interactions, productivity (usefulness) of internet platforms for the organization, and the monitoring and evaluation of success of internet platforms utilized in PR practices. In the next sub-section, findings on these aspects of opportunities are presented.

4.2 Utilization of Internet Platforms for PR in Organization

The participants were asked during the in-depth interviews to provide information on the state of utilization of internet platforms for PR in their organizations. The findings revealed that organizations utilized the internet for information sourcing, for customer feedback, to provide service and support, for marketing, advertising and publicity, for internal and external communication, for content and message creation and placement, and for general interaction through dialogue. These findings were as described below.

4.2.1 Utilization for Information Sourcing and Sharing

The respondents indicated that they utilized various internet platforms for information sourcing and sharing.

The participants identified various platforms available and subsequently accessible in organization for provision of information. The platforms mentioned and observed from the organizations included websites/web pages, Facebook pages, Email addresses, Twitter handles, LinkedIn, Google Plus, Customer feedback sites found on web pages, Live Chats, Instagram, Blogs, Internet banking and YouTube. Therefore, the organizations utilized internet platforms to support their PR activities.

From the observations, most of the organizations had in place communications tools and the majority of the tools were utilized for information sourcing by various publics. Documents analysed, mainly found in the internet sites for the organizations studied, showed that internet was accessible by both the internal and external publics. The websites, for example, were viewed as main medium of communication for the

organizations. The website was used for marketing, branding, passing information to key publics. It was also observed that the websites acted as tools for communicating the organization's vision, mission and values among other messages. These messages were well outlined on the website as well as advertising for services to new customers.

The participants agreed that websites offered stakeholders varied options to interact with the organization online. They further stated that websites and other communication platforms helped the organizations to pass information across a wider public. As observed, the organizations had documented contacts addresses with Uniform Resource Locator (URL) among other contacts of Facebook, Twitter handles, blogs, video and podcasts to reach consumers in different ways.

...Some of the opportunities we have include; Website:-Reaches out to more consumers and entrepreneurs, Easy access to new products, it is cheaper to use, and it is more effective in attracting more customers (En1). ...We have a department of PR and marketing that focuses on services offered by the institution and communicates to public through various channels (Bn1)...The group has a contact centre complete with social media relationship staff to utilise Internet media platforms to propagate information about its products to online social media for example among other users and resolve queries (Ln1).

Internet platforms were also used to pass information across the organizations studied. The respondents pointed out that the Internet media platforms were used to propagate information about their products and services. It was reported that the platforms provided links for information sharing while keeping the customers updated on the latest services and products. Relationship building was also a major function of these platforms. As one of the respondents stated: "...we use it to build new relations and to keep existing clients posted on new products and price changes in our shops" (En4).

From the responses, social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs helped to provide information for various categories of public. Twitter and Facebook

were described as having direct features with large information being able to spread fast and easily. The respondents said the blogs were greatly helpful in spreading information to many publics at any one time, as described by participants En1 and Ln3.

...In Twitter:-It is simple to use and has direct information, Spreads quickly and easily because it just has the content, Photos and videos make the content reach more people and it saves the costs of constructing and maintaining adverts. The Blog: Spreads information at a faster rate, it is cheaper, it is more available and it reaches more people (En1). ...We also have twitter platforms to propagate information on our products and services we offer services like internet banking (Ln3).

Another social media platform identified to be utilized because of its availability and accessibility by many users especially the young people is Facebook and LinkedIn platforms used specifically for information sharing among professionals.

...Our activities are posted online mainly on Facebook this way we advertise our services to interested clients. We keep our customers busy with relevant information. ...we also have LinkedIn accounts that we share information with other PR professionals (Pn2).

Observation and document analysis affirmed the existence of the platforms in the organizations studied. On visiting the various sites, there were observed links to news items, photographs, video files among other features which enable customers to access information. The documents also revealed the existence of services offered, documented organizational history, legal statements, links to twitter feeds, links to blogs, and email addresses.

4.2.2 Utilization for Customer Feedback and Social Interaction

Internet based communication tools were used to provide customer feedback in most of the organizations studied. The utilization of the platforms provided space for customers to ask questions and feedback provided instantly. Complaints and inquiries

were among the activities that the platforms supported. Some of the participants stated as follows:

...We at the call centre, we use internet to reach our publics, for questions, complaints, for inquiries and even to ask clients about our services through customer surveys online (Ln2). ... handling requirements and complaints from both consumers and entrepreneurs also customer care, complaints and even complements across various publics (En2). ...There are emails where questions can be asked and later replied (Bn3).

Facebook was utilized to capture customer opinions about services as stated by one respondent. Internet platforms provided constant feedback and interaction via online contacts. Another organization acknowledged that their Facebook account was used to solicit the customer “voice” on services. Most of the participants agreed that instant messaging increased the chances of customers reaching out for information about organisations.

An observation of the Facebook page and other social networking tools offered brief but valuable communication opportunities for the users.

From the organizational documents, it emerged that the staff were encouraged to use Facebook, Twitter, LiveChats to provide quick and direct information to customers online.

On interaction, organizations and individuals who engaged their publics online were considered responsive and friendly. It is perceived to translate into good sales, goodwill and eventually loyalty. The participants reported that the platforms allowed members to post, read and respond to different issues online; they also agreed that publics have common interests to find each other and interact. One participant also said that young people also interacted on those platforms over different topics such as

starting up businesses and how to obtain financial support. One participant gave details of their contacts which had customer care email addresses, emails of affiliated programmes, LinkedIn, Instagram and WhatsApp contact lines.

... As internet providers, the largest mobile phone company uses internet in various ways, for PR the company uses internet to reach and connect with clients/corporate customers for business purposes (Rn4).

Using various platforms available online, the studied organizations engaged audiences on Facebook and on Twitter platforms. Online networks have media-sharing features and are built around sharing and creating of communities. Email and Live Chats accounts were mentioned to provide online dialogue. Observations revealed that many young audiences were present in platforms like Twitter, Instagram and YouTube where there was high interactivity due to the nature of the platform. One other participant added that their organization used internet to reach various potential members.

...What the company does is to engage the clients online with dialog, we do that through various platforms like email, live chats, Facebook and twitter accounts (Pn2). ...the company has adopted Internet PR and marketing activities with websites and other platforms. The company has several Internet based platforms for its social engagement with its stakeholders. Some of the Internet platforms of interest to this study include Facebook, Google+, Live Chat, Twitter, Instagram, Blog, and YouTube (Rn1).

Social engagement was viewed as important to realize corporate performance based on effective relationship with the target audience. In using interactive Internet platforms, it was possible for the organizations to observe how they were fairing based on customer reviews. From observations it is evident that three of the five organisations studied had well equipped media centres with researchable databases, video presentations and podcasts. Others exhibited high interactive cyber stations with social media platform with staff engaging with online consumers.

One organisation's Twitter account showed trends in which it actively engaged the customer through tweeting process. Social engagements through hashtags like #InequalityKE and #SecuringElections2017 had over 1850 tweets while #MyHighSchoolConfession had 9,658 tweets at the time of the research. Another organization showed the organization's leaders tweeted and interacted on Facebook with different stakeholders.

4.2.3 Utilization for Obtaining Goods and Services

The internet has transformed many areas of organizational and business life. Some organizations conducted business almost entirely online. They also relied on the ability of internet based communication to give instant feedback. Respondents agreed that the internet was very critical to accessing services and even buying products online. It was evident that platforms such as emails were used by organization for inquiry purposes mainly.

...Some of the opportunities we have at the online company include; Website:- Reaches out to more consumers and entrepreneurs, Easy access to new products, it is cheaper to use, and it is more effective in attracting more customers (En1). ...The most important is member education and registration, undertakings and claims of insurance (Bn2).

The documents review showed that many respondents were happy that customers were increasingly using the Internet PR platforms to solve their issues.

The respondents observed that since the publicizing of the Internet based platforms, there had been an increase in uptake of the social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram. The social media platforms were seen to have increased activity, especially over light activity like asking for information and doing follow-up tasks. A participant in the bank indicated there had been increased

activity over the Internet-based platforms as compared to the past. Moreover, activities related to tasks like checking for balances, following up on tasks and withdrawals/deposits had been facilitated by the online platforms that create self-service prompts to the clients.

Clients visiting the branches for the simple tasks had reduced, thus giving the staff ample time to serve other customers needing other services. The communications agency and the online shopping company respondents agreed that there was no change in the traffic visiting their offices as they had less of the physical branches. The Fund respondents indicated that they had not received a significant reduction in the number of visitors to their offices mainly because of the large number of members seeking for assistance through physical contact. It was also indicated that some organizations had been able to increase their interactivity with their stakeholders through the social media, to an extent of understanding their customer needs more.

The use of Internet services had also led to a reduction of clients visiting the branch offices. Subsequently, organizations had been able to improve their services while striving to become more customer-focused in the service delivery. It was also indicated that customers were able to engage the Customer Care Staff at any time and from any platform thus having their problems handled.

The communications consultants also indicated that for organizations planning to reduce the traffic on their branches, it was necessary to implement Internet based Customer Care platforms that were responsive, easy to use, and interactive enough to engage the clients in real-time.

...we reach different communities needing support on community projects, like art, culture etc., the website has a link for those applications. (Rn4)....We also communicate and get business online through internet based applications (Pn1).

Majority of the respondents discussed the relationship building and connections aspects that are made online. They acknowledged that internet has helped to create new business relations online. The respondents from the Bank Group also said their organization had embraced Internet Marketing and PR activities. They said the bank used the Internet as a platform where clients can access services remotely through their mobile phones or personal computers. The organization also marketed its internet-based services.

The use of Internet banking is an indication that Internet platforms are becoming a necessary and critical part of customer relations and service delivery. It was also observed that customer self-service activities through the Internet platforms had reduced the number of people flocking into branch offices and subsequently enhanced service delivery. In fact, most of the clients of the Banking Group said they preferred to use the social media platforms or Internet banking to avoid wasting time and resources. An observation on the group's website showed that the Internet banking platform displayed guidelines and procedures on all the services at the bank.

4.2.4 Utilization for Marketing, Advertising and Promotions

Modern marketing approaches include relationship marketing with a strong focus on the customer, and internet marketing or online marketing utilises online resources to reach target customers and potential customers. It is evident from the response that there is an increased utility of internet by organisations for publicity activities. One

participant noted that they had a department of public relations which conducted marketing activities and publicity.

The department was mandated with maintaining the organization's image and communicating the advertisements and messages to the entrepreneurs and consumers. The department also helped to create awareness through social media platforms (En2). Other participants similarly noted that the Internet was used for advertising, from the organisations website which they advertise products and promotion of services. The telecommuncations company respondents pointed out that their website gives clients additional value on the use of their applications for earning airtime points. Another participant mentioned that the organization advertised its services on the dailies (newspapers) to reach as many people as possible. They also backed up the adverts on their website. The respondents generally agreed that the utilization of internet media helps to forge strong relationship with existing as well as new customers.

Another aspect that was addressed by the participants was that of advertising. The respondents said their organizations used both contemporary forms of advertising like newspapers, and internet based tools. This practice was an aspect of marketing and advertising mix. One of the online shopping company participants indicated that the organization had a website on which they advertised products. The company also had a Twitter handle and blogs used for all kinds of communications, advertising and promotions.

... We use Internet to get our products advertised out to target potential clients; we have a variety of products and so we use variety of platforms to advertise, on our website will lead you to our many platforms and our many pages to access that you need (En4). The institution has a department for PR and marketing that focuses on various services and communicates to them through an array of channels. Mostly the institution advertises its products in the dailies

(newspapers) to reach as many people as possible. The institution also uses website to advertise its services. Every department advertises on the website with options that allow clients to ask about the service information (Bn3).

Documents analysed showed many advertisements placed on these organizations' online platforms. For instance, one Facebook account showed advertisements, promotional items and information for publicity. The insurance fund website equally showed advertisement of its services with the mission and mandate stated as "achieving universal health coverage by year 2030." The organization's website was also used to advertise and provide self-service to stakeholders. The website screen showed the overall look of the organizational interface. It also indicated the minimum amount that members could contribute to earn their coverage during any health incident. The website further offered interactive services.

4.2.5 Utilization for Internal and External Communication

Internal and external communication is a critical part of every organization. It was established that the organizations studied utilized internet platforms for internal communication within departments and across branches. The Bank Group had other platforms with which it engaged with its clients like "Web Chat" which facilitated one-on-one engagement with the staff. The Bank Group's Facebook account had over 16,000 "likes" which translated to actual visits and interactions. The Facebook account allowed customers to view what other stakeholders thought about the organization. It also provided options of rating the services and commenting in good/poor services offered.

...In the bank, we use internet for many things, internal communication through emails, whatsapp groups and other internal communication portals (Ln3). ...We use internet for internal communication as well as to our stakeholders on share performance, we post our reports for public information (Rn1). ... and to also reach our individual and corporate members across the country- in our branches, we use it to communicate internally and to carry our performance surveys among our employees, and also to rate our services by members. The supplies and procurement section uses internet for that purpose, it is mandatory for our procurement applications to be sent online (Bn2). ...The organization has twitter, facebook, livechats, website and email to communication both internal and to external clientele (Pn3). ...we do research for organizations which we do online based on the type of survey (Pn1).

The interviewees also reported that the internet was used to carry out internal research, online surveys on customer satisfaction among other surveys. Supplies and procurement departments utilized the internet for purposes of procurement.

4.2.6 Utilization for Creation of Content and Uploading of Messages

Contemporary consumers use a myriad of internet-enabled devices to search for product recommendations, to connect with colleagues on social networks and post their own content online. Utilising internet platforms to create content is thus a part of current PR practices. The process begins with the choice of appropriate media, with specific audience in mind. The participants in all the organizations said that the ICT departments were responsible for uploading content on the platforms.

...With the ICT team, we are responsible for maintenance system, we ensure that users are kept connected at any one point, we also make sure that the messages are uploaded on our sites, we work with our agency who work on our messages which we ensure are uploaded on the right time, If we have messages on YouTube we ensure we upload, on our Facebook page there is a team that works on ensuring messages are effectively and efficiently placed (Ln4). ...The consultancy firm is a PR agency that works for clients to realize their communication needs. I can say that we are PR and what we do is PR for our client, we create online messages for our clients. We do so much online including creating advertisements for our clients because we are an advertising agency. Our IT section is important in uploading and monitoring content online (Pn1).

It is noted that specialist or professionals engage in drafting media content, it is considered a process that needs appropriate writing styles for certain media. It is therefore clear from the response that concise communication is important in order to reach online audience. They quoted as:

*...The ICT works with the PR department together with the Public Education section to reach various stakeholders including the internal public We do not create the messages and information on our website, we use specialist to do so, but we engage in drafting what we want the public to know and get (Bn4).
...Our IT section is important in uploading and monitoring content online (Pn4)*

One PR professional said that content was the backbone of internet media, putting emphasis that organizations needed to publish fresh, relevant information on a regular basis for audience consumption, and that monitoring was equally very key in content creation. Documentary reviewed showed organizations staff creating content for onward uploading to the internet platforms.

4.3 Opportunities or Advantages Internet Presents for PR

This section presents the opportunities or advantages of internet in Public Relations. The study sought to find out the opportunities or advantages of internet use for PR. To achieve this objective, the respondents were asked what they considered as the advantages of internet use for PR practices. Based on the findings from the interview, the respondents identified the following advantages: Internet was less costly, speedy, accessible and available, provided opportunities for customer relations, communication, and brand awareness.

4.3.1 Low Costs of Publicity

Out of the five organizations, four indicated that Internet platforms presented a cheaper way of communicating to their target customers. Three of the interviewees observed that using Internet platforms to advertise, more so Facebook, Twitter and the main website was cheaper than the traditional forms of advertising. They said a budget for television (TV) advertisement for one day could be used for two (2) weeks on digital marketing. They explained that online platforms were costed based on the “clicks” the adverts got, and not the blanket advertisement like that of TV.

Indeed, it was observed on the documents analysed that the organizations were shifting their advertising budgets from the traditional media to the Internet based advertising platforms. The respondents further observed that Internet based platforms made it easy to monitor how the budget was spent, and how many clients had visited the website or the page.

...The biggest advantage of practicing public relations from a practitioner's point of view is that Internet is low cost, speed and ease of distribution of messages especially when compared to print media (Pn2). ...also low-cost internet access has opened a lot of opportunities, low-cost means of communication with current and potential customers...(Ln1). ... it is cheaper to use, and it is more effective in attracting more customers (En1). ...Spread of information with ease and at a very fast rate and less expenses compared to television and print (Pn4).

The respondents from the Elephant Shopping Company (E) said the Internet was the defining factor of its success. Observations revealed that the company advertised products online and prospective clients could select products, order online and pay on delivery. Their mode of confirmation was a phone call made to the customer. In some cases, complete or partial payment for the product was done beforehand. A customer

care representative of the company indicated that their advertising costs were much cheaper whenever they placed advertisements on other popular websites.

...Advertising and sales and marketing online, being able to create new business every single day (En3). ...At the Blog: Spreads information at a faster rate, it is cheaper, it is more available and it reaches more people. In Facebook: Reaches wide range of consumers, it is faster, and it is cheap. In WhatsApp: it is the cheapest, Sends messages to a wide range of users thus information reaches more consumers and entrepreneurs and easy to access and faster. In Email: it is Cheaper, Faster and can be accessed by many consumers and entrepreneurs (En1).

Another respondent stated their organization advertised through the online shopping company, which had a large number of existing clientele. Through the platforms, the company provided sales and marketing, display of products, price changes information, promotions and new contacts among other services at a relatively minimal cost. It was also observed that social media platforms presented more opportunities for closing sales than did the traditional platforms like print media and television where customer contact was hard to establish.

4.3.2 Speed of Information Flow

The study found that the internet was the fastest way to attract and sustain consumer attention by companies. Social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter and Goggle+, according to the respondents, presented a huge opportunity for businesses to pass a lot of information to many audiences instantly. It was noted that information could be updated regularly, and quick response was also given almost instantly because of photos and videos attached to the content. It was further observed that the organizations had representatives who engaged clients (visitors) online immediately. These agents provided real-time communication. The documents posted online for one organization showed it took three minutes for the representative to respond to a client,

making the platform fast and reliable for services that needed not be accessed at the branch office.

The participants added that Twitter accounts were used to inform the stakeholders about events sponsored or organized by the organizations. For instance, L Group sponsored golfing activities for its staff and customers. The sports event was advertised on the social media platforms.

...The Internet is an immediate form of communication for the bank, Websites, online newsletters, bulletin boards and other forms of Internet communication can be updated at any second. All information and news is up to the minute (Ln4). ... As an Agency dealing with communication, I can say that; Internet is an immediate form of communication. Web sites, online newsletters, bulletin boards and other forms of Internet communication can be updated at any second (Pn3).

One respondent reported that the internet was a fast means of communication. The participant said activities such as checking one's financial status, following up on tasks like withdrawals and deposits had been facilitated by the online platforms that create self-service prompts for clients. One of the biggest advantages mentioned was that the internet is not limited by space or time, and messages are available at all times. Many public relations practitioners from the agency studied, see the Internet as the way to go because, the technology is ripe, economic barriers to enter are low and there are almost no regulatory hurdle. It is seen as cheap, speedy and ease of distribution of messages than the traditional media.

4.3.3 Opportunities of Accessibility

It was observed that the organizations' websites had accessibility features to make it easy for users to navigate through the platforms. The search engine optimization feature, for instance, generated links to more content. The respondents pointed out that

when dealing in public relations activities, one wants message to be conveyed to as many people as possible. They noted that, there are thousands of people who log on each day. Using the Internet as a tool was thus strategic for the companies. To the respondents, no other option for connecting with so many people in so short a time could compare to the online platforms.

...The available internet platforms for PR activities include the website where the we have has a website and the website has links that open to Facebook, LinkedIn, and Google+ (Bn3). ... Our message is available 24 hours a day and seven day a week. The Internet allows us as an organization to be discovered by millions of people all across the world. Potential investors and even individual people will visit our websites (Ln3).

Internet accessibility was observed from the internet sites of the organizations studied. Internet accessibility was also witnessed from the available internet hotspots in the organizations in form of fee internet networks. There were common agreements among the respondents that social media platforms gave a wider scope of presenting the information the stakeholders would need to have efficient services from the organization. For instance, the financial intuition was able to use the website to advertise for its services and products with changes and flexible schedules on when to run advertisements on the select popular websites for other organizations and blogs.

The companies also felt that they were having several options for advertising and reaching their customers at a much accessible manner. To them, the Internet of Things (IoT) provided many options for organizations to present their products in the way they liked. For instance, the bank group had a YouTube channel where it posted its advertisements and any information made for the clients. The option of YouTube, Google+ and other interactive media presented opportunities that helped the organizations to be accessed and reached by a special group of clients. The

respondents said these media offered more flexibility in terms of advertising, presenting of the information specialized for the target audience and designing on when and where to advertise. The customer care staff also pointed to this flexibility. They said the Internet made possible to work from any branch office or even at their home because of accessibility.

4.3.4 Opportunities of Enhanced Customer Relations

Internet platforms have interaction option like Live Chat where stakeholders can engage the customer care staff in their issues. Live Chat was described as being fast since it did not allow for disruption from other customers. Therefore, the platform enabled the customer care staff to resolve the customers' concerns within the shortest time possible. The sample Live Chat below illustrates the speed (less than 10 minutes) with which the customer care staff responded, indicating the efficiency of this platform in stakeholder engagement.

From the Live Chat, it was also evident that clients could engage the company from any area as long as they have access to the Internet and the company website. The comments and chats provided solutions making it easy for customers to access services at their convenience.

A lot of customer relations opportunities were observed from the organizations call centres. Here staffs were able to interact with potential clients on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms. Most of these platforms had direct links to websites/webpages. Another participant noted that the biggest advantage or opportunity was the connection with customers online. Other participants stated as follows:

...Customers are able to talk to our customer care representatives online without having to visit our shop (Rn1). ... We solve the customer problems online. We have online live chats, 'web chat' here we engage on live chat with our customers without visiting our branch we can solve your problem, you can see from the screens (Ln2). ... In LinkedIn: targets the specific consumers and entrepreneurs and there is a positive response (En1).

The respondents also stated that Facebook accounts enabled organizations to provide clear communication with clients having their concerns handled. The platform allowed clients to indicate whether or not they were satisfied with services.

In addition to online interaction functions with the target audience, one participant noted that they also engaged stakeholders in "entertainment and humorous" communications with the aim of creating strong bonds and rapport. For instance, the PR team posted comments and pictures to draw attention from the audience who contribute actively. One screenshot observed on Facebook was a picture of a cat making faces.

The image had kept many Facebook users engaged as evidenced by the many comments and likes that picture had attracted. One of the organizations' Facebook page indicated high interactivity of customers. The page had several marketing video clips that were used to reach many clients with over 2.9k views for one of the video clips.

The use of the internet has made it less costly for marketers to get information to the public, for perfect for interactive marketing. The fact that you can quickly and effectively create, join and even leave online interactions is an advantage really (Ln1). ... we have integrated marketing and public relations on all this platforms because the company has been able to maintain business relationships online (Rn2). ...Internet here creates a networking environments and motivating customers and Prospects and to also increase customer trust. Customer information, we selectively inform our customers even on personalized level, about our services through all the internet platforms available on our website (Bn2).

The advantage of interactive marketing as a result of Internet use was also underscored by the participants. They said that interactions online increased exposure of products and increased the number of people viewing the information placed on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and Google+. According to them, social networking websites allowed individuals to interact with one another and build strong relationships. The participants explained that by joining the social media channels, organizations enabled the consumers to interact with them and engage in direct communication. Moreover, they reported, interactions online felt more personal to the users than did the traditional methods, especially in respect to marketing and advertising. This personal quality of interactions had helped to instil a feeling of loyalty among existing and potential customers.

4.3.5 Opportunities of Enhanced Brand Awareness

One respondent, commenting on behalf of a financial institution, indicated that the Internet presented a better way of creating brand awareness, customer leads and new acquisitions of new customers. He said their organization's brand had been understood better because of the information that people read online.

...The opportunity I see here is the high quality timely earned-media that is paired with the delivery of well-crafted owned media that elevates brand awareness to the next level and to ensure that the media coverage we secure has a higher value to our client. Through online tools, clients have understood us and we understand their needs. Corporate identify is also experienced by the information organisations post about events sponsored or organized activities and in the process stakeholders have had the opportunities to access the platforms to view the events and support opportunities available (Rn4).

4.4 Ensuring Interactivity and Monitoring Interactions

In this sub-section, participants were asked to state how they engaged in interactions and monitored online interactions on for PR purposes. The findings revealed that organizations monitored interactions using call centres, the PR department, and online representatives who were not necessarily in the call centres or in PR departments. Also revealed was the automated responses used by some of the organisations under study. The findings were as described below.

4.4.1 Monitoring of Interactivity from a Call Centre

The question on interactivity and monitoring of interaction was intended to track practices on communication as well as providing feedback to customers. It was observed that all the five organizations had strong mechanisms for monitoring online interactions and providing feedback and customer engagements over the internet-based platforms. Two particular organizations had these interactions monitored from a call centre, with staff exclusively responsible for responding and monitoring online communication.

...Interaction is made possible because we have staff and a call centre which deals with customer response. When you look at our website you will realize that we have instant questions answered by our staff on standby (Ln1). ...The bank has a call centre; some are automated machines which are loaded with automated information given to consumers at any one point (Ln2). ...Customer care online chats offers online support to its customers. They are always prompt in answering customers questions online. If you have any issues you can contact them through any online links and you will find customer care agents on standby (Rn2).

The participants noted that their webpage indicated the people who were online and allowed for one to create meaningful conversations from different platforms. They described the platforms as interactive and that organizations ensured they had staff in place to respond to different queries online.

PR is concerned with ensuring customer satisfaction and thus monitoring the interactivity of the social media platforms was crucial for assessing the performance of the organization. It was observed that two of the organizations studied had rooms with computers networked to access a variety of communication platforms.

...We have live chat page, online customer care executives, Facebook page and customer service lines and many others (Rn1). ... Our company often uses social media such as facebook and twitter to answer customers questions and offer solutions on various problems, you will be directed to other links depending on the type of solution you are seeking. We also have email addresses and we have customer care agents who interact with customers to answer questions promptly (Rn4).

It was observed that customers could visit around the clock, download information, and sometimes place orders on the online platforms of the organizations studied. However, where a client failed to provide their contact information or any details about their buying preferences, it was impossible to contact them or develop a relationship. As such, when a customer wanted to ask questions, submit comments or discuss a product, they were asked to provide telephone contacts to enhance interaction. The purpose of call centres was to respond to customers online by answering their questions and comments on the online platforms.

4.4.2 Interactivity and Monitoring by PR Department and Online Representatives

Respondents indicated that there was flexibility with the approach used to engage the customers. They said that it was possible to have staff work over shifts, including night shifts to keep customers engaged on the social medial platforms they operated. One respondent explained as follows:

...Our IT section is important in uploading and monitoring content online (Pn4). ... Our PR department deals with all forms of communication with our external clients including online the has staff who respond to customer questions on call and online PR(Bn3). ... In Jumia, we have an online centre, many staff working on different products engaging customers online, it is our

business and we have to do it online. Our staffs are paid on basis of commission (En1).

The participants from the online shopping business emphasized that it was very easy for them to interact online because their business was based online. Therefore, for them, it was mandatory to communicate with existing and potential clients. The staff said they could also track information online by engaging visitors on interaction spaces provided for in blogs, Facebook and Twitter online. Another participant also noted that they engaged online communicators, especially on behalf of their clients, on a regular basis by interacting with online publics via all the platforms. For the online shopping, the respondents emphasized that, being based online, the staff were able to track conversations to complete business. The following observations further highlight these findings:

...Online based tools are structured in way to have interaction space and that it how we keep conversations going on Facebook, Twiter, blogosphere and live chat accounts on our webpage (Pn4). ...With the many staff members we are able to communicate with online audience (En4). ...We at Gina Din interact with customers through commenting on blog, replying to followers on twitter, and also entering forum discussion and so on (Pn2).

The respondents said their organization had in place customer care staff whose sole purpose was to provide clients with real-time responses on their questions. The researcher did observe the customer care staff addressing clients directly by replying to their messages on the company's Twitter platform.

The online social media platforms presented a flexible means for engaging the various stakeholders of the organizations studied. For instance, the respondents agreed that customers were also able to access services any time of day and have their concerns addressed promptly. Moreover, they observed that, many customers were able to access services at their convenience without having to necessarily visit branch offices.

It was also observed that the platforms enabled the customer care staff to engage several customers simultaneously.

4.4.3 Monitoring and Interaction through Automated Response and Tools

The respondents from the communication agency noted that organizations that had a comprehensive response and nurturing system in place tended to provide thorough and well-timed communications. They observed that such platforms comprised of measurement systems, auto-diallers, and email/direct mail system synced, making it easy to provide automated responses to clients. The participants suggested that the easiest way to achieve this type of communication was by use of automation software and applications.

... we have online registration and online payment, beneficiaries can send hard copy documents or email after registration and uploading, and it makes processing faster and reducing human error, again we have a way of collecting monthly payroll by products to use via online by-product systems from different pay-points. We engage with our customers online on Facebook and email portals, some are robot account which you cannot reply to but we can pass information to our agents, customers and corporate customers (Bn1).

One participant noted that the platform played the role of a social listening tool that documented the different persons who mentioned brands both on social media or a blog post which you can then acknowledge and thank people publicly.

4.5 Productivity of Internet Platforms for the Organization

This sub-section presents the research findings on the productivity of internet as a PR platform in organizations. The study sought to establish the usefulness of these platforms in organizations. The main findings presented included: building relations, large coverage, business enhancement, advertising costs, skill acquisition and communication enhancement.

4.5.1 Building Relations

Public relations is a strategic communication process that seeks to build mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. Consumer relations is a component of public relations and the internet is very useful in enhancing and eventually building relations online. The participants said that Internet platforms helped to create online communities. Internet was considered very useful in establishing lasting contacts and for disseminating organizational reports and factsheets as well as all information from management. Therefore, to the respondents, the Internet platform had enhanced their business activities. The participants further stated that online engagement had strengthened rapport with their clients. They noted that responsiveness and friendliness were the necessary qualities for eliciting positive response towards organizations via these platforms. As some of the respondents explained:

...With the contact centre, we utilize internet platforms to build online relations and to also propagate information about our products and to resolve queries (Ln4). ...wide spread of information through our webpage, we connect with ourselves as a company, with our stakeholders and our general public at all times (Bn4). ...sometimes challenging we have to deal with both prospective and non-prospective clients, unless business goes through we still engage them (En2). ...With online tools we are able to place our advertisements online all the platforms available for our company, it has been very productive for business engagement (Rn1). ...It has increase business partnership especially for us internationally; we have gained new partners, new clients and stakeholder networks (Pn4).

Another participant explained that the internet platforms had created more interest among readers than had the other forms of customer engagement. They said the customers regarded the Internet as a productive and convenient way to access organizational information. They said that the internet platforms allowed for personalization of services and information, leading to better engagement with clients and, subsequently, greater customer satisfaction. Moreover, they observed, the

platforms promoted a two-way communication between the organization and their clients. It was indeed observed that some organizations had personalized the platforms to enhance their interactivity with the clients. Additionally, the productivity of the Internet platforms was assessed in terms of increased output, improved customer satisfaction, increased sales volumes, or intake of a particular products and improved public image for the company. The participants said the productivity had been enhanced by fostering customer satisfaction, better perception and reducing the workload at the branches through reducing visiting customers due to increased uptake of social medial usage.

4.5.2 Large Coverag

The respondents said the Internet was useful because of its potential to attract the attention of a wide range of consumers. Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and YouTube present large opportunities for organizations to reach many consumers simultaneously. As one respondent put it: “Social media platforms provide the perfect opportunity to take advantage of word of mouth and see it spread” (Ln2). It was observed that the visitors of the online platforms also established connections among themselves through which they exchanged useful information about the organizations, products and services. For instance, the act of “Liking” a given brand on Facebook was noted to increase the chances of the brand being noticed across the numerous media channels. The participants also noted that advertising online had been very instrumental in reaching thousands of existing and potential consumers.

It is very productive considering the amount of information we are able to rely and also the impact of that information can be felt (Ln2). ...In advertising and marketing our online platforms have been very good because we have different products and so we advertise all online. We advertise a lot on Facebook and Web Pages Online businesses are very productive because we cover a very large audience, the only challenge will be on delivery but we reach many

people (En3). ... It has been productive because it has increased our coverage; we are able to reach many people apart from the civil servants alone (Bn3).

4.5.3 Productivity of Internet Platforms on Business Enhancement

The participants who were interviewed reported that the use of internet platforms had enhanced business communication and business in general. They reported that social media platforms like Facebook and blogs helped to generate positive brand attitude. The platforms had also reportedly improved business engagement intentions, relations and interactions between the readers and the bloggers. The respondents said online communities shared their experiences and in the long-run influenced others. Some of the respondents gave their views as follows:

...we have been able to achieve tremendous growth with online shoppers. For example, let's say we are selling a new baby product, we submit the advert on blogs written by users like mothers and baby shops and we offer to send a sample for a review (En4). ... It has helped us a lot in customer education, because many people get to understand how we operate through reading content posted online. People are more knowledgeable even though we still get customers calling for help. Direct capture of sales information is also possible online and in the process we can formulate forecast purchasing patterns of different products (Bn2). Online communication can help any company like ours to get negative response and in the process improve services based on how people look at you. You can communicate with dissatisfied customers and be able to improve (Pn3). ...Online platforms are able to influence buyers, and in the process it has enhanced our business (En4).

According to one participant, the power of the internet lies in its appeal and multiple resources. From the quotations, it is intimated that online responses were instrumental in business improvement because they provided platforms for building goodwill and image creation. Another respondent said that negative responses could also improve services and the way organizations handle online criticism. The respondents constantly referred to the aspects of buyer influence and purchasing patterns as part of the influences of online platforms.

4.5.4 Advertising Costs

Advertising costs vary from one media to another. One respondent advised that an organization dealing with mass audience needed Internet-based platforms to reach its clients. She also said that organizations could spend less and have more interactive forums with their customers online instead of spending money on print and television media. The respondent also indicated that majority of the organizations desired to reach more clients at minimal costs.

...The net is productive because are able to do online marketing and advertising cheaply compared to other media platforms like TV and Print .It is also very productive because we save a lot on advertising (Ln3).

It was observed that online platforms made it possible to know the number of clients who had been reached by use of the digital media platforms. In platforms such as the Television, it was only possible to estimate the number of viewers and place the advert and cost (budget) based on the time of day; prime time and non-prime time. The participants indicated that using Internet-based platforms was a cheaper form of advertising. They said these platforms enabled the organizations to reach many clients at any one time. For instance, the bank group had a an audience of 183 followers on Twitter. Its tweets could also reach thousands of customers at any given time.

4.5.5 Skill Acquisition and Communication Enhancement

Internet communication according to participants is said to be very beneficial for new skill acquisition. Internet presents a lot of opportunities for learning how to manage internet communication platforms in terms of content creation, monitoring and interaction techniques.

...Internet communication is very beneficial and productive because as experts, we have developed a lot other skills which is required to drive online presence

like graphic, research and other skills. It has opened up many opportunities for new skills (Pn1). ...Oh, we use internet to teleconferencing to hold meetings within the organization, high definition of technologies support meetings involving individuals located in different cities (Rn4).

Internet was said to also provide new opportunities for internal communication and faster adoption of emerging information communication technologies in organizations.

4.6 Monitoring and Evaluation of Success of the Platforms Utilized

The research participants were asked to state whether or not their organizations monitored and evaluated the success of the internet as a PR platform. This sub-section presents the findings on the measurement and evaluation of the successes and customer satisfaction levels in the use of the Internet for PR activities.

4.6.1 Measurement of Success through Online Monitoring and Evaluation Tools

The respondents noted the use of tools such as Google alerts, Google analytics and social media enabled the organizations to track visits to their online platforms daily. They said the organizations were able to sort and view frequently asked questions online which were sourced from Facebook, Live chats, Twitter and E-mails. As observed, the sites showed that the page had received over 7 million 'likes'. To further increase its authenticity to the viewers and visitors, the users had given star rating of 3.5 to the company web page. The Facebook pages also provided the physical addresses of the company and its branches. It also indicated the opening hours, the website of the company and a comments section to allow customers to make inquiries and comments. It was observed that, typically, replies were given within an hour of questions being asked, indicating that the customer representatives were actively present on the social media platforms.

The respondents further explained that the online PR platforms had made it easy for organizations to provide clarifications, product information, engage in transactions and other PR functions. The respondents interviewed said that they monitored the activities of visitors to the online platforms using complaint search boxes, citing that other tools were expensive.

As Rn1 pointed out, different tools for monitoring and measurements were installed on the online platforms. These tools, he explained, automated viewership of online traffic. Other participants also expressed their views as follows:

...We are able to monitor opinions through interactions on social media platforms especially by our technical staff online customer service agents. All those are measured through Likert scale.. (Ln2). ... On our website, we can see how many people visit our site through Google analytics, it helps show direct traffic online even on social media sites among other tools like tweeter analytical, re-tweeted can be traced using tools installed to monitor on twitter (En2).

During the interview, participant En1 stated that their company was one of the organizations with high interactivity within its social medial platforms. She added that the online PR platforms allowed them to responded to the many concerns much fast. Some of the respondents also stated that the information communication technology (ICT) departments conducted online regular monitoring, as indicated below:

...ICT team can answer the question better, but we have online tools to see who says what and the responses they get (Rn4). We have a lot of online monitoring and eventually measuring tools like, Likert, being able to see the likes, comments in numbers, and even those that monitor negative information are installed tools which can be used on different Web Pages including the Google analytics and rating tools available online (Pn1).

The respondents believed that social medial platforms were easier to monitor and evaluate by assessing the feelings, perceptions and interactivity of the customer base with the organization. From documents reviewed, Organization E operated a Facebook page which contained some advertisements specifically targeting customers on data

bundles and other services. It was observed that the page had 87% response rate and typically replies to customer concerns were done within an hour. On the Facebook page, the company had over 1.5 million likes, comprising existing and potential customers who had viewed the organization's services.

The documents online also contained ratings by customers for services, submitted either through nearest branches or the Internet platforms. The documents showed that the Facebook account provided direct lines for the company's customer care.

4.6.2 Measurement of Success through Physical Reviews and Online Research

The observation and review of online communication of the Bank Group revealed that the Instagram account had over 1400 posts with 157,000 followers. The account had active followings compared to its Facebook or Twitter accounts. This web page indicated high interactivity of customers and the related group of companies. The page also showed several marketing video clips that were used to reach many clients. On average, the clips had had over 2.9 million views. Customers and other stakeholders engaged the company's representatives by channelling their greavances to which they received prompt feedback.

Many of the respondents indicated that their organizations had put in place call centres with staff working online to monitor communication. Some of the respondents commented as follows:

...We have different staff dealing with different responses at one point, we direct questions to the centre and then to various sections and departments, like complaints, security issues are channelled to fraud and security department to investigate (Ln4). ... We can see the number of comments and the number of likes from the social media platform that is how we respond to some instantly (Bn3). ...Online shopping is interesting because we just have people online, so monitoring and eventual success of sales is documented on reports we generates at end of business monthly (En3).

Some of the respondents further reiterated that they were able to monitor online visitors because the company and business agents were present online 24/7. A respondent from the communications agency explained as follows:

...as PR experts we like to do our monitoring and measuring manually sometimes because it gives us a platform to engage with different messages at any one point, we also have other online based tools that aid in ratings and showing number of comments and visits (Pn3). ...Monitoring the number of shared videos and the people interacting at a time Practitioners like Gina Din, we carry out market research to monitor and see responses online, we have to look for customer preference and serious comments that can impact on our businesses (Pn3).

Another respondent also had this to say: "...At the group we measure success through asking respondents to state their degree of preference of the internet sites, from this we can rate the most preferred platform, form their we update and regularly use those" (Ln3).

Other responses gathered from the bank Group's documents showed the company started using the Internet platform in October 2010. Since then its Twitter accounts had attracted 183,000 followers who were highly likely to be clients. From the Twitter platform, the group had also followed 17,200 people, notably business partners, clients and other individuals, for the purpose of staying updated with the market trends.

Moreover, the Bank Group had over 135,000 tweets, indicating that the company interacted actively with existing and potential clients. The respondents from the bank group said these interactions were monitored online and physically from its ICT offices across the branches. They said the questions or comments or information gathered from the online platforms were shared across the organization to inform practices. Tweeting was seen as an active form of communication in which clients

could engage management on products and services. Similarly, another organization had received over 5,100 likes on its Twitter account, which indicated the high probability with which the company reached its targeted clientele. It was observed that the platform had over 7,000 photos and video clips that sensitized clients about the organization.

4.7 Constraints of Internet as a PR Platform for PR in Organizations

The following sub-section seeks to find constraints while utilizing the internet platforms for PR in organisations. The following revelations are presented in this sub-section are as follows: Challenges of security and logging-in processes, Challenges of online information Management, Challenges of professional expertise ,Challenges of Connectivity Challenges of ineffective socialization.

4.7.1 Security and Logging-in Processes

The respondents said one of the major challenges the customers often raised had to do with the logging in process constraints, especially the security checks involved. They noted that the logging in process was complicated for some clients. For instance, one respondent explained that Twitter required one to be a handler and follower whereas Facebook tended to be so open that organizations might fear to use it in formal communication.

It was observed that some of the documented e-mails showed a disclaimer barring replies. In these e-mails, clients were instead given referral links which the respondents said customers did not like. They reported that clients preferred to give direct feedback via e-mail instead of logging into the website to provide comments or seek

clarifications. Another issue that emerged from the findings had to do with security concerns in the use of online platforms. As one participant explained:

...Security is the main challenge in utilizing the internet platforms, the challenge comes in to users when they have to verify and put security checks that we have among very many other minor challenges like users complain that they do not know how to use certain platforms and links in referring sites (Rn4).

The staff ensures security controls and in one organization it was noted that internet platforms had security features tailored by the organisations to ensure security.

The organization being a large institution the participants noted that they had departments that dealt with other forms of communication but other information had to be approved and critically looked at before posting online. The IT section was said to be mandated with maintenance and checking to see if all systems work.

4.7.2 Online Information Management

Utilization of the platforms was said to be basically successful, only that organizations had to deal with a lot of information and responses at the same time. Online information management was a challenge that emerged from most of the participants. PR professionals from the communication agency discussed that internet lacked space and information management making it very technical.

...The organization is large and implementation of online relations can be so challenging, people are used to the old methods of communication because they are equally reliable (Bn3). ...Challenges of internet utilization lies both on the users end to those information givers. Users need to know how to engage with online platforms, the organizations need to know why they are using the tools and weigh the benefits. Otherwise the platforms will just be available (Pn2). ...It is challenging for some customers to keep up with the process to the point of delivery. It involves serious internet engagement to the end (En2).

Nevertheless, Facebook was described as being more relatively useful in marketing of products and services. It served as an alternative platform for customer relations where the organizations' websites were overloaded.

4.7.1.2 Professional Expertise

One respondent stated that the online media was difficult to use, especially for online shopping, where users did not have sufficient technical know-how. He added that there was need for an appropriate strategy to provide professional knowledge on the applications of online media technologies for both the employees and the customers.

Some of the skills that the respondents cited included graphic design and interpretation, research, navigation, backend management, analytics, optimization, data security, problem-solving and monitoring. Below are some of the views of the respondents regarding training :

...From ICT point, I can say that utilization of the internet communication platforms requires a lot of training and technical expert knowledge so that it is well utilized (En3). ...Employees lack the required training, or we can say we do not have competent people to work exclusively on internet platforms (Bn2). ...Internet utilization by organizations is very challenging because of the methods and procedures involved from content creation to graphic designs that are required. It is challenging if you don't have professionals to do that (Pn1).

Most of the respondents agreed that the online PR procedures and technical processes required in-depth knowledge of information and web-based technologies. The respondents from the communication agency said they were trained regularly on Internet communication. However, they observed that that there was need for continuous learning and training due to rapid nature of technological advancements.

4.7.1.3 Internet Connectivity

Most of the respondents cited Google+ as the most difficult platforms to connect to and navigate through, especially in places with weak internet connectivity. The respondents said connectivity delays discouraged many customers from accessing PR-related information online. As shown in the statements below, connectivity constraints was also linked to the level of knowledge needed to resolve technological problems on the online platforms.

Utilization of the internet is only available to those who can access connectivity, those people who can use internet and to those customers with e-commerce knowledge and with individuals who wish to explore sales online because of the reduction costs involved (En4). ... The difficulties in utilization is seen on the number of people connected because not most people would be able to access the Internet and not all members would see the information put on the website Bn1. ...The ICT department has a lot to deal with in terms of enabling people to utilize our platforms, and the challenges we get on utilization is network connectivity, availability of apps which our clients need to utilize the platforms online (Ln4).

4.7.1.4 Ineffective and Inappropriate Socialization

Individuals feel free on the internet. The internet affords people the opportunity to express themselves freely with little regard for consequences. As such, for most organization, the internet and the information therein is unpredictable and difficult to control or regulate. On this issue, the respondents commented on the destructive outcomes of internet platforms, especially due to poor or improper utilization. A number of them pointed out that the platforms such as Facebook were used mainly for socialization and that such networks were not appropriate for holding formal conversations about company businesses.

...The communication channels are utilized mainly as a socialization agent, especially Facebook and Twitter. For blogging it is used mainly by people who have a common topic to discuss like business support and financing and so on. (Ln2). ...Subscribers, dealers and other stakeholders utilize the internet platforms to socialize, the dialogue is interesting and maybe not very useful for

suggestions and decisions but we accept the socialization aspect of the Facebook, Twitter, Linked-in, live chats and so on (Rn1).

Other respondents added that customers utilized the internet to post negative opinions and information which could be damaging to the brand image. All these views show that there is poor sensitization on the functions of social media networks. A PR manager expressed fear that with social media networks, simple mistakes damage both the company image and the effectiveness of the online platforms.

4.7.2 Availability of Specific Platforms for PR

This sub-section presents the research findings on the challenge of availability of specific platforms for PR. The following constraints were identified by the respondents: Constraints of integrating consumer relations strategies, constraints of online content management, and constraints of loyalty, and image management.

4.7.2.1 Constraints of Integrating Public Relations Strategies

Almost all the respondents pointed out that the internet platforms, especially social media networks, were useful when integrated within a larger communications strategy. However, one respondent stated that customer relations could never be realized online. One participant noted that some of clients were drawn to social media platforms because they represented low-cost methods of PR engagements compared to the traditional methods. He suggested the need to balance strategies by mixing the traditional and the online methods in PR practice. Other participants had these to say:

...PR for banks is customer relations, business relations, investor relations and such, so we feel that customers need to walk in to the banks for service and at the same time engage them online. So customer relations and stakeholder relations cannot be realized online alone (Ln1). ...For PR Internet tools are very effective but can never replace face to face communication. Public

Relations is about building relations and this cannot always be done on a computer screen alone, we need to combine strategies (Pn1).

Based on the above views, it was important to recognize Internet platforms for PR as being supplementary to existing strategies, not a replacement. One PR professional on noted that organizations must be ready to listen to online conversations in order to ably manage dialogues and emerging issues that were pertinent to the brand image and business operations.

4.7.2.2 Constraints of Online Content Management

Management of online communication requires technical expertise or experience. The research participants cited a dearth in technical know-how in respect to content management, specifically during online shopping, building a customer base, engagement with existing and potential clients and influencing buyers. Some of the respondents stated as follows:

...For PR, the challenges we face is content management, most of the time we have to seek expert and technical skilled workers to deal with building and maintenance of online relations. (Ln4). ...For the department loading and trying to create catchy messages that attract buyers is very challenging, because you have to be very creative with advertising online, we rely on adverts to get customers and so they have to be very of very good standards. We sometimes have to promise free items for certain purchases (En4). ...Social media specifically twitter and Facebook is time consuming, on the users personal lives and also on our side it is more challenging to select and sift messages that are relevant across all those channels (Rn4).

Inconsistency in membership and visits to the online platforms were also cited as some of the challenges of integrating PR online. The respondents said there was lack of consistency in the accounts used by clients registered online and some did not use the existing accounts often leading to suspension. They also mentioned that organizations

were inconsistent in updating the websites with current information. Indeed, based on observations, some of the organisation's online communications dated two months back from the time of the study. Another respondent also explained that it took long for customers respond to issues when internet connectivity was unreliable.

4.7.2.3 Constraints of Trust, Loyalty and Negative Organizational Image

One respondent said the LinkedIn platform was still quite new to many online users, making it least trusted by both the organizations and customers. Another respondent said he found the online platform lacking in confidentiality. He feared that accounts on LinkedIn could be hacked easily. Another challenge was also that it was difficult to distinguish serious from non-serious clients on these online platforms. Therefore, the challenge of using online platforms is that the PR practitioner can never be certain that he is reaching the right people. Moreover, every bit of information posted online could be potentially damaging to the organization. Therefore, the PR practitioner has to waste a lot of time responding to every issue raised to control publicity. The views below emphasize some of the findings:

...Building customer trust and loyalty is part of our PR function, and the challenge is trying to get people to trust you before engaging business deals (En2). ...Call centre experiences give a chance to customers and Individuals to feel free on the internet, it allows them the chance to express themselves and mostly without consequences so people can say anything that can question the organization image (Ln3). ...For PR functions like campaigns, investor relations, corporate social responsibility CSR activities the internet has been very useful because we have connected with many people, we also make announcements online and the challenge is compliance with our terms and conditions, especially if people need support from our foundations among others (Rn2).

4.7.2.4 Constraints of Narrow Audience

The respondents stated that internet communication tools were only accessible to those with internet-enabled technologies such as smart phones. Moreover, the respondents observed, since most of the online platforms were owned by different vendors and companies, it was difficult to share information across networks. Therefore, the organizations always have to create different types of audiences across different platforms. Besides, audiences in regions with weak connectivity were limited in accessing online information. As two respondents explained:

...Because subscribers choose whom to follow on these sites, products can reach a very narrow target audience, we attract very young people and yet our subscribers are mixed (Rn1). ... The main challenge is, illiteracy in usage of the Internet platforms not all members use the internet and therefore very little information is disseminated online (Bn1).

The respondents cited an interesting phenomenon where organizations at times posted information online for a limited time because of sustainability issues. As such, only a limited number of people online could see such information within the time. The respondents further pointed out that platforms such as Live Chats had very few users and were thus unreliable in PR engagements. Therefore, organizations seeking to integrate PR on online platforms must select only the most effective means of communication. According to one respondent, social media networks have not only had an impact on organizations but on marketing itself; the era of catchy punch lines and striking images is no longer the be-all and end-all. PR engagements online is about establishing continual dialogue, building trust and interacting with the right audience in the right way, as fast as possible. As such, marketers have to be at the forefront engaging consumers and controlling the brand.

4.7.3 Constraints of Interactivity in the Platforms Identified for PR

This sub-section presents the research findings on the constraints of interactivity in the online platforms identified for PR. The constraints identified were: Constraints of security and privacy concerns and constraints of systems interaction management.

4.7.3.1 Security and Privacy Concerns

One of the constraints cited by the respondents from the telecommunications company included lack of privacy in the communications system. This view suggests that companies may be afraid to utilize the telecommunication services to relay PR-related information. Other two participants from the Bank Group stated as follows:

...Our customers lack of confidence in the security of online banking particularly when it comes to the use of online tools to do transaction, people feel insecure with their financial information on internet (Ln1). ...Security in the bank is a concern for both of us, Most of time we promise clients that we protect their privacy, but many believe it is not possible to be anonymous online (Ln4).

Indeed, security concerns were repeatedly cited by most of the respondents who reiterated that they interacted online with a lot of caution.

4.7.3.2 Constraints of Interaction Systems Management

The respondents said one of the challenges with PR online was that some users (both organizational employees and customers) failed to follow up on past communications. As such, there were many incidences of broken communication processes which had led to loss of mutual trust. From observation, it emerged that the Facebook pages of the organizations were mostly used by the stakeholders to make enquiries and responses were made through the PR offices. Nevertheless, it was noted that since many customers preferred Facebook, there was always a challenge of non-response to

customer enquiries. Some of the PR officers admitted that they were always overwhelmed by the big data from the social networks.

Some stated that they tried to interact with as many clients as possible at the same time to overcome the big data problem. However, they said the problem with dealing with too many customers at once was the likelihood of failing to address the unique needs of some. Besides, some of the platforms, by design, only supported interactions between a limited number of people.

...Interaction can be quite a challenge because of the number of people on the platforms...Tracking conversation is very involving and time wasting but we still dialogue (Rn2). ...Online shopping is very involving, so we have many people trying to answer customers and it can very confusing in the process some conversations go unanswered because of the traffic (En3).

One participant differed by citing that online interactions were defined according to the available tools and purpose of online visits, noting that audiences visited the internet to make inquiries follow advertisements and to buy goods and access services. Another participant dismissed online PR engagements altogether, suggesting that she still found face-to-face or telephone calls most effective. One of the causes of delayed feedback was highlighted by one respondent thus:

....Our social media platforms are usually used for interactions, especially on giving feedback to people asking questions. It is not very busy as such, so maybe delayed feedback (Bn2).

The plate below illustrates that the bank Group used its Twitter handle to inform stakeholders about events sponsored or organized by the organization. Sports events, which formed part of the company corporate social responsibility (CSR) and publicity activities, were also publicized on the social platform.

Further, the study found that, for most PR practitioner, tracking of individual communication with clients was difficult, meaning most customers did not receive satisfactory responses. One respondent reported that some PR practitioners simply made responses not based on authenticated information so as to avoid further engagements online.

Besides, as one respondent explained, some of the conversations on the social media networks tended to get easily side-tracked by unimportant issues:

...Interaction has to be followed so that you solve individual problems, and you can only do so when you have the right systems installed to back up the platforms. You can interact with other online users; the only challenge will be when people start to talk about non important, unrelated issues or topics (Pn3).

4.7.4 Causes of Constraints faced in Utilization the Internet for PR in Organizations

This section describes the potential causes of the constraints faced in utilizing the internet for PR. The main causes identified were: lack of proficiency and lack of role specification in organizations, as explained below.

4.7.4.1 Lack of Proficiency on Systems Management

The respondents stated that lack of expert knowledge was a major constraint to proper implementation of PR practices online. As such, lack of knowledge was a major cause of existing problems in online PR practices across the companies studied. Nevertheless, the respondents seemed to believe that systems could be put in place to overcome all the problems of online communication. As one participant stated:

...A significant organizational commitment to Internet-based applications requires information technology workers who are skilled in new technical areas such Internet security and digital commerce (Ln4).Similar to goal

setting for your organization, internet platforms should be planned to determine your communication objectives before designing your websites, it goes a long way in management (Pn3).

Another respondent highlighted the need to keep systems simple. She explained that complex sites attracted very few visitors. Another solution given by the respondents was the use of hyperlinks to problem solving sites, which one participant said would save a lot of time. The respondents said for most of the organizations, the public had segments with some levels of illiteracy and other segments that did not see any need for technology applications for PR. According to one PR respondent, these groups need to be sensitized on the value of online PR practices. Other suggestions given to increase traffic on the online platforms included creating messages that were appealing and attractive.

4.7.4.2 Lack of Role Specification

Individuals adopt internet platforms such as the social media platforms to build relationships or connections and to interact. Therefore, organizations can leverage these sites as platforms on which to engage clients directly. It was observed that on most of the online platforms of the organizations studied, customers exchanged information, made comments and reviewed product. However, one challenge that was reported was the lack of the marketers' or PR practitioners' over the quality and flow of information. To resolve such problems, one respondent suggested the use of personalized signatures. He explained that channels such as e-mails encouraged greater responsibility and quality control on the information relayed. On lack of role specification, the respondents gave their views as follows:

Creating roles among staff dealing with online shoppers so as to avoid confusions, and also having people who know what they are doing roles can conflict because engagement online is very important to keep your customers

posted, delaying may loss them (En2). ...Our staffs need to be trained generally and more strategies need to be put in place as far as online communication is concerned (Bn4). ...Listen closely to the people that matter to your business requires specific persons within the system to create, import, and share lists of social influencers and important clients. You can also quickly respond to common questions or you can have customer requests by saving pre-approved and on-brand responses for future use (Rn1).

Participants from the communications agency noted that social media advertising was fairly new, pointing out that it can be a complex process that requires effective planning, testing, and measuring. They said training of staff to deal with the online communication and having a team to manage the online communication exclusively would minimize the problems. It was noted that organizations seeking consultancy services usually asked for professionalism.

Therefore, the respondents said that professional knowledge was needed to manage the media, which most companies did not have. Therefore, the study established that training would go a long way in solving many problems incurred during online communication.

4.7.5 Challenge faced when Monitoring of the Platforms

This section discusses the results of the study on the constraints faced when monitoring the platforms. The challenges identified included lack of monitoring tools and systems and challenges of monitoring large content, as explained below.

4.7.5.1 Lack of Monitoring Tools and Systems

It is not easy to monitor the behaviour of those who go online, especially considering their large numbers. As one respondent explained, if a consumer, for example, initiated the online purchase process to buy items, and then bailed from the shopping process

before completion, the company representative could not easily track the consumer down or re-market the service or product based on the knowledge of that consumer's behaviour. One respondent agreed that it was very difficult to understand and respond to the unique needs of the often too many online shoppers. Another respondent suggested that it was important to ask more questions to ascertain the unique needs of clients, but this too would require a lot of time considering the number of visitors of online platforms.

The respondents from the bank Group added that users experienced challenges with registration on the online platforms. They said the company often required the customers to provide their names and demographic information as well as the types of products or services they may be interested in. According to the respondents, this information helps the company to provide relevant communication to clients. Another participant noted that they always viewed their online visitors, but the challenge was with too much online "traffic" at any given time which made it difficult to respond to every customer.

While one organization acknowledged that it had some monitoring tools in place, most of the respondents said some of the tools comprised expensive applications and systems for their companies.

...Monitoring is same as what we have talked about in tracking conversation, whoever, I can say that organizations need to install the systems that have been evaluated and considered good (Pn3). ... We use different technology to monitor and look at information online, we use the analytics tools available on internet for free, like for Facebook and Twitter analytics tools. We use tools to look for mentions across social media networks; we have IT professionals to do the monitoring (Rn1).

One of the respondents identified 'wildfire' by Google as a tool that could help in measuring the brands that are gaining fans the fastest on Facebook, Twitter, and

Google+. He said the tool could help a company to view the total number of followers and the percentage of fans gained in the past days, weeks, months or a longer duration. Other participants suggested putting in place a designated team to monitor online communication. They said such a team would conduct continuous evaluations and report on the effectiveness of online PR tasks and process, technical tools and applications.

4.7.5.2 Challenges of Monitoring Large Content

Consistency was identified as the most challenging task, especially when monitoring large content from all the internet communication tools. Another challenge highlighted was that of mechanical breakdowns caused by the overwhelming number of online shoppers. The respondents said sometimes information overloads resulted in computer hung-ups or crashes. Citing other challenges, some participants spoke as follows:

...If you've built an online presence for your company, you should plan on keeping tabs on what's being said about you and your industry on the web. Failure to plan is failure to success'' Online business today is a two-way conversation, and you can't participate unless you know what discussions are going on online (Pn4). ...We talked about it earlier, although we have systems to track and monitor online communication which should be used regularly (Ln2).

Technical capabilities are said to be needed to solve the challenges of internet communication. One participant agreed that not all problems can be solved through internet; and a lot of technical capabilities therefore was needed to solve customer issues online. It was indicated that technical persons can pull in statistics from Twitter, Facebook and easily use them to monitor, engagement only if you have staff to manage that role.

4.8 Stakeholder Perspectives on Opportunities and Constraints of Internet as a PR Platform

This section discusses the findings on the perspectives from different stakeholders on the opportunities of internet as a PR platform. The section examines the participants' perception on the utilization of available and accessible internet to obtain services and stakeholders' perspectives on the opportunities and constraints of the internet as a PR platform.

4.8.1 Perspectives on Utilization of Internet Platforms for PR

Most of the respondents said they accessed social media platforms in order to obtain information about the companies. One stakeholder said that he utilized the platforms to inquire about products. He commented that the organizational representatives on the online platforms were very responsive. He said he always received prompt replies to his questions on mail. The stakeholders also regarded the organizations' Facebook pages, Twitter handles and websites as platforms with more options than ordinary advertisements on television or print media. They said they relied on these platforms to stay abreast on new information and periodical offerings. As some respondents explained:

...I utilize internet to obtain internet banking services, I also utilize to check the statues of my loans and to inquire balances, I utilize the internet to check on latest advertisements, being an entrepreneur, I seek for business opportunities and check on how my bank can be of help. The bank also advertises sponsorship activities and campaigns. They post their financial reports and as a customer I am assured of a stable bank (Ln5). As I said I utilize the net to inquire, request, make orders online and it has not failed me, maybe just delays of delivery which is normal in the world of business, but with information, the company has many websites with a lot of information on different items (En5).

Most of the research participants were of the view that the internet had helped them to access services that they would have had to wait longer to access physically. A

respondent said the internet providers, for example, had facilitated online availability and accessibility of faster and safer services such as shopping and banking. Another participant said he used the net to take advantage of promotions. He said being online had helped him to keep track of freebies, discounts and information on new products on offer like the flex bundles and phones on low sales offers.

Another respondent pointed out that, for corporations, internet for PR was a great means for public communication. He also said the PR platforms aided in faster internal communication. Another participant hinted that some major corporations did online supplies and procurement. She said these companies also advertised for open vacancies through the online PR platforms. In the words of some of the respondents:

As a ...customer, I find it convenient to communicate online with the online customer care service providers, they are easily accessible than calling customer care, internet is always available when I have bundles, although you cannot access for free (Rn5).I run a general supplies shop in the CBD and I am an online shopper, I source my staff online from China, Dubai and most locally sourced from Jumia Kenya. I have internet available in my business premise and I can access internet everywhere. I make orders to Jumia especially after visiting the website to find out that which I need. Which most of the time is available, I even ask online on details and I get (En5).

The study established that internet was easily accessible to a majority of the respondents.

In fact, as one respondent opined, business premises represented hubs where people could access the internet for free or at minimal cost. The majority of the respondents felt that internet was utilized for PR because of its relatively low cost. The communication agents believed that they could utilize the internet with ease because of the training that their companies had provided. From a management perspective, PR professionals interviewed said they embraced the internet because of its wide

availability. They said the adoption of internet for PR was in keeping with current trends where most organizations utilized online platforms for all forms of communication.

4.8.2 Perspectives of on Personalized Internet Tools for Users

The respondents said applications such as Live Chat afforded users with platforms to communicate with service providers and to elicit immediate feedback. They also said internet banking had enabled customers to do banking anywhere without having to visit the bank physically. The respondent's regarded these platforms as secure because of security checks that guaranteed safety of personal information.

The research participants further described the many internet sites and links as organized. They said the sites provided different pages for different products and services. For instance, one respondent, describing the online business site for online shopping, said the platform categorized products, goods like house hold, electronic, phones, among others, in a way that made it easy to locate the products that one needed.

One respondent also commended the design of the online platforms thus:

...I believe that organizations design their tools based on the communication needs and some designs enable interaction others are used for feedback only and many designs depending on what you want to achieve. So at the end of the day Web Pages differ from one entity to another (Pn5).

On personalization, participants felt that the internet platforms had features open for public viewing. For example, a respondent said one organization's information about the management, organizational vision, mission, values, the strategic plan, all reports, factsheets were appropriately displayed. The sites also displayed press statements and

news releases meant for public consumption. According to one respondent, the internet had become a one stop shop for all the relevant information about an organization.

4.8.3 Perspectives on Opportunities and Productivity of Internet for Service Delivery

The respondents said the Bank Group had numerous communication channels that were very easily available and accessible at all time. The participants said customers did not necessarily need to visit the bank to carry out transactions or make inquiries, because all the services could be accessed online. They illustrated how consumers could transfer money from different parts of the diaspora with agents in Eastern Africa and beyond. They said the internet had opened new opportunities for financial transactions which were easy to use and very convenient for most consumers. Another participant also said the internet provided a lot of information for clients and conversely opened opportunities for organizations to reach out and recruit new customers. The internet was also regarded as an enhancer of interactions between businesses and the different publics. The respondents also believed that online advertising increased the chances of buying and selling of items. Other perspectives were provided as follows:

...Internet has really solved a lot of things, it offers a lot of opportunities for us users, we can do research online about certain issues, we can also get services online without going to the service point, we can actually read a lot of information about organizations online and from that we get to understand them better and many others (Rn5). ...well well, we are in an era where the majority of the world's population has now gotten into a powerful online platform and where the continuous flow of new content and opinions never stops. Professionals like us should engage in online communication with potential clients, because that is where business is headed (Pn5).

Another respondent posited that the internet platforms were gradually phasing out advertisements on print media. She said many companies are realizing that most of the

existing and potential clients increasingly rely on the internet for many of their daily needs. Therefore, in response, organizations are also providing most of their advertisements, announcements, promotions and campaigns online.

A respondent from the communication agency indicated that the internet as a PR platform was gaining a lot of prominence among people of different generations and across different businesses:

...Social media, if I may add has gained a lot of prominence these days and businesses within few years of its existence are using the medium. It is the medium to socialize and many are overwhelmed by the transformation of communications processes especially among generations Y. Social media has now crept into the boardrooms of business organizations and just like the internet; it has transformed the selling and buying processes. Though social media is a recent phenomenon, it has proven to be just as effective as or even more effective than traditional marketing. Several organizations are now struggling to have a presence in the web in order to interface with customers far and near. We have put many customers on the platform and we are happy to do that... (Pn5).

4.8.4 Stakeholders' Perspectives on Constraints of Internet as a PR Platform

This section presents the research findings on the stakeholders' perceptions of the constraints of internet as PR platform. Specifically, the sub-sections discuss the respondents' general views on challenges they face in utilizing the internet to obtain services, their perceptions of challenges they experience while interacting, and their general perceptions on other issues they consider constraints of internet as a PR platform.

4.8.4.1 Perceived Challenges in Utilizing the Internet for PR Services

The participants' views on the constraints faced while utilizing internet were varied. One respondent observed that challenges were many but they did not outweigh the advantages.

One major challenge cited was the availability of many sites for the online shopping company which at times caused confusion among online shoppers. One respondent explained that many online pages created confusion when making orders, especially where there were many agents involved. Another respondent said the heavy traffic online at times resulted in communication breakdowns. Some lamented the poor connectivity which always impaired communication processes. One respondent had the following to say:

Some security checks are very tedious and if one is not used to it, one can easily give up, You have to visit the branch to learn how to login to the web pages for internet services. Sometimes you just receive default messages even unwanted and unnecessarily. Sometime the services go down without any notices. Some security alerts can make you panic- like after a transaction a message comes to you saying that somebody tried to check your account recently..... (Ln5).

According to one respondent (Bn5), the main challenge was with staffing. She said the organization had many social media interactions but few employees to engage with clients online. From observation, there was evidence to this view as the researcher witnessed an incidence of delayed feedback on the company's social media platform.

Another interesting perspective had to do with respect to internal communication. A respondent explained that online communication had replaced face-to-face or personal conversations among employees. He regarded this as a challenge because their personal and professional relationships were impaired. The respondents also said an

overreliance on internet communication meant that information would not be available to those with no internet connectivity.

The research participants expressed concerns over the difficulty in using internet applications because of lack of skills. Another participant said some stakeholders feared to utilize the internet because lack of patience and ignorance. She said this cohort often attributed internet use to those of young generation and for non-professional functions. Another participant from the communications agency had this to say:

For PR experts, the major problem is carrying old PR practices/ traditional PR to the online platform, we have to train staff to shift to producing e-newsletters, blogging, and creating media content for the platforms very challenging (Pn5).

The stakeholders explained that many PR professionals were still stuck in the traditional forms of PR. They said such professionals needed to be sensitized and trained to use the online platforms.

4.8.4.2 Perspectives on Challenges of Interaction with Service Providers

The research participants perceived the internet sites as complicated. They said some of the online platforms were not easy to navigate. One respondent remarked as follows:

Interaction is made possible on the social media sites like Facebook and twitter which I follow and instead of visiting the bank I can have a Live Chat with one of the online customer care agents. The interaction is very good and sometimes rewarding if you ask me. Challenges is on accessing services and the security protocols you must follow, I guess people give up on some procedures and processes” (Ln5).

Most of the interviewed respondents identified constraints in the logging in procedures. Another constraint identified was that of ineffective/incomplete interactions. One respondent had this to say about referral points and procedures:

Shopping online is an interaction process from the start, because you talk to an agent online and you ask questions and expect answers and feedback immediately, so its continues interaction, the only difficulty with interaction is when you ask for specifications of different items and the process is long. Before making conclusions the interaction is discontinued and has referral points, from the sales agent to the invoicing, I believe procurement and payment points we engage different people (En5).

The telecommunications stakeholders stated the company's online interactions were fast. However, they felt discouraged by the fact that, often, they would meet a different customer care representative online during follow-up interactions. They said such inconsistencies forced them to recap past conversations, a practice they found annoying at times.

The participant further observed that this particular organization's online site had several referrals to other sites or agents. They said these referrals consumed a lot of time and increased browsing costs.

The stakeholders from the Insurance Fund (Bn5) said that interactions within the organization were faster than outside. Therefore, the respondents said the platforms were only used to gather information useful in decision-making. Another constraint perceived by stakeholders from the communication agency included information overload online. The respondents complained organizations could easily lose clients by posting too much content online without regard for the rate at which readers could consume them. One respondent made the following remarks:

Many professional feel that paper publications are still better. The structure of the Internet and the use of hypertext create many chances for the writer to lose the reader and lose the chance to communicate with them. A certain website may receive many hits (100,000) in one day, but how many people actually stopped and read the page and how do you know if they understood the content? You cannot know easily (Pn6).

4.8.4.3 Perspectives on Constraints of Productivity of Internet platforms for Users

According to the respondents, most the internet-based PR practices were productive, but one of the common challenges was ineffective management of platforms. The respondents from the Bank Group said internet banking had been a great success. However, as one respondent explained, with many users, especially on social media, some comments went unread. Another respondent said low customer satisfaction with online PR platforms came from poor management of the online platforms:

Interaction could be minimal and customers fell unsatisfied, some comments are ignored and this reduces interaction and in the long run it beats the logic of having many platforms. The department charged with updating the internet messages is not well trained in graphic design, so we have to use external experts and it is very expensive (Bn5).

Irregular checks was also cited as a great challenge to internet-based PR:

Internet is productive as earlier said, you are guaranteed of brand enhancement, good image, insights from target audience and not forgetting the provision of improved customer relations because of allowing direct engagement with individual interested in your brands or products but media is difficult, you need regular checks so that information is not picked by the press for their reporting, and it is hard to monitor closely socialization to some extent (Pn5).

Another constraint was that of mistrust of online services. Nonetheless, one participant acknowledged that, for online shopping, consumers had no choice but to learn to trust online business.

4.8.5 Perspectives on other Issues about the Use of Internet for PR Purposes

The study also sought respondents' perspectives on issues emerging from the use of internet for Public Relations purposes. According to one stakeholder, security was a major issue:

...I want to believe that security still remains a major challenge for internet banking, fraudsters like to hack into financial accounts and maybe what banks can do is to still check on the issues that can threaten financial online banking. Like even people using other identities- not real identities and pose like customers, this is common (Ln5).

Another participant acknowledged that online platforms were important and simple for those with the ability to utilize computer communication tools. In addition, the respondents said that the platforms stored information, but exposed to the information to unwarranted access:

...The giant telecommunications company has a very busy online platform, with very many people interacting at the same time. Information is also available on almost everything you need to know. Maybe if you are not computer savvy it will be hard to utilize the platforms. Again they record all communications so no secrets online (Rn5).

4.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the first research question of the study: What are the Opportunities of internet as PR platform? In summary, this question sought to find out the Opportunities of internet as PR platform, including: Utilization of internet platforms for PR in organizations, opportunities or advantages the internet presents for PR, interactivity and monitoring of interactions on the platforms identified for PR, productivity of internet platforms for the organizations, monitoring and evaluation of the success of online platforms for PR.

This chapter presented the research findings on the third research question: What are the perspectives of stakeholders on the Opportunities and constraints of internet as a PR platform in organisations? The table below provides a summary of the findings in Chapter Four.

Table 4.2: Summary of Findings in Chapter Four

<p>Opportunities of Internet as PR platform in organizations</p> <p>Utilization of internet platforms for PR organization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilization for provision of information, Utilization for answering customers questions and feedback, Utilization to obtain Services and Support, Utilization for Marketing and advertising, publicity, Utilization for internal communication and stakeholder comm., Utilization to create and upload messages and content, Utilization to provide interaction among consumers <p>Ensuring interactivity and monitoring interactions in the platforms identified for PR (track communication and provide feedback)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interaction monitored by PR department, Interaction monitored by Online individual representatives and research , Interaction through automated response <p>Productivity (usefulness) of internet platforms for the organization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Productivity of internet platform on building relations, Productivity of internet platforms on large coverage, Productivity of internet platforms on business growth, Productivity of internet platforms on buyer influence, Productivity of internet platforms on advertising costs, Productivity of internet platforms on skill acquisition <p>Monitoring and eventual evaluation the success of the platforms utilized</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measurement of success through online monitoring and evaluation tools, Measurement of success through online research and through physical reviews
<p>The constraints of Internet as a PR platform in organizations</p> <p>Difficulties while utilizing the internet platforms for PR in your organization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges of security and logging-in processes, challenges of online information Management, Challenges of professional expertise, Challenges of Connectivity, Challenges of ineffective socialization <p>Challenges on personalization of the internet platform for PR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges of custom-made, Challenges of strategies in building consumer relations online, Challenges of processes and condition of using online tools/ of logging in and security checks <p>Constraint the platforms present for PR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constraints of consumer relations strategies, Constraints of balancing content management, Constraints of Trust ,loyalty and compliance, Constraints of narrow audience <p>Challenges or constrains have you encountered in interactivity in the platforms identified for PR (challenges of tracking communication)</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constrains of security concerns, Constrains of online ‘traffic’ and interaction systems management, constraints of ineffective utilized media <p>Thoughts of causes of problems faced while utilizing the internet for PR in your organizations (and suggested ways to solve them)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency causes of online content management, Lack of systems management skills, Lack of expert knowledge on online management <p>Challenges of monitoring of the platforms utilized</p> <p>Challenges of monitoring tools and systems, Challenges of monitoring large content, challenges of professional monitoring expertise, Challenges of management and planning for evaluation of online content</p>
<p>Perspectives of stakeholders on Opportunities of internet as PR platforms</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perspectives on utilization of internet platforms for PR • Stakeholder perspectives of on personalized internet tools for users • Perspectives on opportunities and productivity of internet for service delivery
<p>Stakeholder Perspectives on Constraints of internet as PR platforms</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived Challenges faced while utilizing the internet for different services • Stakeholder perspective on challenges of interaction with service providers through the internet • Stakeholder comments on constraints of productivity of internet platforms for users
<p>Perspectives on other issues about the use of internet for PR purposes</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security issues cited • Computer savvy, competence

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the summary and a comprehensive discussion of the key findings of the research, conclusion and recommendations. The chapter begins with a brief restatement of the research problem, methodology and interpretation of key findings under each research question. The discussion of findings is made with reference to previous studies presented in literature review chapter. The chapter also makes theoretical applications, the contribution of the study findings to policy and practice in contemporary PR, especially in relation to the use of the internet. The Chapter then ends by providing the researcher's reflections of the experience of the PhD study.

5.2 Discussion of Key Findings

5.2.1 Opportunities of Internet as PR Platform in Organizations

In answering the first research question, the study identified that internet platforms were utilized in various ways to reach the publics in view of building and maintain relations. An organization's publics are created and maintained through deliberate actions. One way by which organizations build relations is through internet communication which was the focus of the study. According to Ashcroft (2001), Macintosh (2000) and Sallot (2004), that Internet offers several advantages, when compared to the other media, such as speed of communication, almost immediate product delivery, interactivity, customization and personalization. Therefore, the use of internet for PR can improve productivity, efficiency and organizational management.

The Internet, according to Hallahan (2004), also provides an ideal forum for group communication and interactions. It has dramatically changed the way PR practitioners distribute information, interact with key publics, deal with crises, and manage issues. The study established that the internet offered Opportunities or opportunities for both internal and external communication across the organizations' departments, branches, and to even to the general publics. The organizations utilized the internet for organizational communication and information sharing. The research participants stated that websites offered varied options to interact online; they pointed out the various platforms for that purpose. Moreover, other platforms mentioned and observed from the organization ranged from websites or web pages, Facebook pages, E-mail address systems, Twitter handles, LinkedIn, Google+, Customer feedback sites found on Web pages, Live Chats, Instagram accounts, Blogs, Internet banking systems and YouTube posts and accounts.

Public relations being a process of managing relationship, social networking websites represent excellent ways to manage numerous relationships (Dwyer, Hiltz & Passerine, 2007). Through organizational communication, the study found that organizations were able to give customer feedback fast with the help of online customer care representatives. Information sourcing and sharing was considered cheap and accessible by most respondents because of the online platforms. Customers considered the internet a place to check company profiles, press statements, factsheets and other financial statements that were available for public viewing. Websites were perceived as most personalized platforms with all the details about the organization.

Organizational communication studies have analysed various aspects of employee communications, although the studies are not limited to public relations tactics (Fulk,

1993; Sitkin, Sutcliffe & Barrios-choppin, 1992). Professional public relations publications have also documented the use of new technology on public and employee relations. Nevertheless, other important aspects that were not clear in this study included the use of computer and telecommunications-mediated technologies such as electronic publishing of documents. These documents included employee newsletters, employee teleconferences, employee E-mails, employee electronic bulletin boards and other multimedia delivery systems. These were used to inform employees, communicate employee benefit programmes, recruit new employees, and for training.

Another opportunity identified in the study was the ability to obtain goods and services at the most convenient time and place at low cost or no cost implication. This finding reiterated the view by Gregory (2004) that, "The advent of the Internet and electronic communication has transformed Public Relations, just as it has transformed many areas of organizational and business life" (p. 245). Some organizations conducted business almost entirely online and relied on the ability to communicate instantly to meet their goals. This finding was confirmed by the respondents from the bank Group and online shopping business.

The respondents averred that online platforms served multiple purposes depending on the user's goal, from information access, entertainment and shopping to financial transactions that formerly required a visit to the goods and services providers. The study found that the internet is an important channel to access services, including commercial transactions, at any point. The respondents said the internet platforms have the benefit of convenience. They said these platforms allow customers to perform financial transactions. Previous studies have shown that businesses have already realized that they must use internet platforms to engage with their key stakeholders to

maintain relevance and drive conversation (Bacon, 2011). However, the respondents perceived the internet platforms as a secure because of the security checks and logging in processes involved contradictions from other participants who thought that navigating through the platforms was the most difficult thing to do.

The study also revealed that the internet platforms enhanced the components of PR in terms of advertising, promotions, branding and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Business organizations strive every day to build and maintain relationships, disseminate information, and news to improve their brands. Prior to the advent of the internet technology, PR programmes relied heavily on third party influencers, such as the media, to endorse their brands. The respondents emphasized that, although they advertised services, on the dailies (newspapers) to reach as many people as possible, they also backed up the adverts on their website. The use of internet media was described by respondents as to forge relationships with existing as well as new customers.

One of the online shopping company participants indicated that the company had websites from which they advertised their products. The company also used its Twitter handle and blogospheres for all kinds of communications, advertising and promotions. Previous research backs this finding Researchers agree that internet enables organizations to expand communications and connect with different groups. According to Blankson (2009), organizations such as the East African Breweries, Kenya Shell, Kenya Power and Lighting Company, Unilever, and the East Africa Harbours Corporation became aware of the virtues of publicity in the late 1940s. After independence in 1963, most organizations and union groups acknowledged the need for planned Public Relations. Organizations like the Kenya Power and Lighting

Company developed their communication to include areas like brand awareness, while Kenya Shell developed a wide range of corporate social responsibility programs in areas such as environmental conservation and philanthropy (Blankson, 2009).

Viral publicity is a new phenomenon that is facilitated by the internet. It can be described as the 'word of mouth' of the internet which facilitates faster and cheaper marketing, advertising and promotion of services and products.

The study also found that most organizations used the internet for PR because of its low costs, especially in advertising. The opportunity to publicize on low or no cost was an interesting perception that respondents thought that Internet presented. The respondents said social media platforms presented an opportunity where organizations could reach many specified customers in a period of time while regulating their budget. It was also found that using social media platforms enhanced customer specification where the firm was able to target specific users. For instance, a respondent observed that many young audiences were present in platforms like Twitter, Instagram and YouTube where there was high interactivity. It was also indicated that the organizations marketed products using both traditional media and the Internet platforms, but with a much focus on the social media since customers would read and interact with the social media platforms.

The respondents observed that advertising on television, radio and print media can be very expensive. Therefore, to most of their organizations internet platforms helped them to meet most of their budgetary requirements. PR service providers said they made use of the easy and cost effective internet tools for publicity. Previous studies on publicity confirm that due to its speed, efficiency and economy, the internet has had

increasing use across industries ranging from retail and banking to the media for publicity (Giovannetti *et al.*, 2003). The respondents felt that the internet afforded their organizations several options for advertising and interacting with their customers. Further, they felt that online platforms were more flexible in terms of advertising, disseminating information to specific audiences and deciding on when and where to advertise.

Opportunities to acquire skills, especially on creation of content, were also cited as the outcome of internet use for PR. Content creation depends on the type of media.

Unlike magazines and newspapers that come out periodically, online outlets are also available and updated in time. As the online media continues to advance, PR professional must continue to update their skills and educate fellow staff as well as their clients to apply emerging tools. This will help them to ensure the online PR platforms continue to be the source of trusted information. The respondents suggested that the most important strategy was to create relevant content for online platform. They also said fresh content tended to draw people continuously back to the organizations' websites, blog, Facebook pages and online other platforms. Subsequently, huge traffic helped to raise the companies' brands or profiles. The study revealed that relevant and quality content formed the backbone of effective online PR engagements.

The respondents said platforms that did not churn out fresh content were considered dead. They further identified a variety of skills which they said were required to drive a vibrant internet presence. These included graphics, research, design, back-end management, analytics, optimization, monitoring among others. Past studies show that

not knowing which to deploy, when and how to deploy online tools or utilizing them wrongly is a sure road to virtual disaster (Breakenridge, 2008). Therefore, in this study, the participants perceived internet platforms as tools to learn new skills in the areas of PR and information and communication technology.

The study further established that a number of internet platforms have been created to expand awareness, build knowledge of products and services and sell of products. Reduction of clients visiting the branch offices was described as an important opportunity brought about by the adoption of online PR. It was also indicated that customers were able to engage the customer care staff at any time and from any platform.

The communications firm also indicated that organizations planning to reduce traffic on their branches needed to implement internet-based customer care platforms that were responsive, easy to use and interactive.

Investor relations is a public relations component. The study found that organizations used online PR platforms to issues current press statements, provide executive biographies, reprints of speeches, product information, company factsheets among other communications. Previous studies have shown that investor relations can be monitored by analysing the target publics or by gathering investor information using computer and internet mediated technologies.

In addition to consumer and investor relations, stakeholders thought that that personalization of internet platforms had become the most advanced form of client engagement; it was also thought to enhance customer satisfaction. The respondents

said personalization or customization also promoted a two-way communication approach in which the organization and the clients share information and decision. It was observed that indeed some organizations had customized the platforms to enhance interactivity with their clients.

This study also identified Opportunities or opportunities of online PR platforms for management. It was observed that organizations had defined specific guidelines on how to manage online communication. They had in place appointed persons and procedures to monitor online interactions to identify benefits for the organization. The organizations employed different strategies to manage interactions on the internet platforms to ensure full utilization and generate effective messages to strengthen relationships their publics.

Regarding strengthening online engagements with clients, Men and Tsai (2012) state that there are three essential strategies: disclosure or openness, information dissemination, and interactivity management.

The study further examined interactivity and monitoring of interaction to track communications as well as provide feedback to customers. It was observed that organizations had well-established mechanisms for providing feedback. They also had in place strong internal mechanisms for monitoring customer engagements over the internet-based platforms. Indeed, PR is concerned with ensuring customer satisfaction. Therefore, monitoring the interactivity of the social media platforms is critical to assessing the performance of any organization.

5.2.2 Stakeholders' Perspectives on Opportunities of Internet as PR Platform in Organization

First, the respondents said the PR platforms enabled stakeholders to communicate their information to the organization and enhance service delivery by indicating areas for improvements. This finding was in line with the view by Gruing and Gruing (1989) that organizational communication has shifted from a one-way publicity to a two-way symmetrical communication paradigm. The stakeholders also believed that the internet was accessible and available for information sourcing and sharing. They considered it a tool for immediate feedback. Some of them said the online platforms provided easy access to goods and services, especially by fast-tracking procurement and supplies procedures. Secondly, the stakeholders considered the internet PR platforms as places where they could access organizational communications such as press briefings, statements and releases, factsheets, organizational mission, vision, values and important corporate messages. The internet was further perceived as being most effective in the publicity and management of specific events.

The above findings reiterated those of Holtz (2002) and Lattimore *et al.* (2004), who argue that the organizations now operate in an information economy as opposed to an industrial one, and this causes a change in the traditional Public Relations practices that were rooted in a top-down approach. As evidenced by the views from the stakeholders, and in line with the views of Holtz (2002), the consumers in the information age are more aware and demanding.

Thirdly, on personalization, the stakeholders perceived the internet tools as being secure. They said there were sufficient security checks and controlled logging in processes. Most of the other respondents were of the view that these procedures

complicated the navigation of the online platforms. However, to the stakeholders, the long processes helped in ensuring security. Fourthly, the internet PR platforms were seen as tools with the ability to pass a lot of information over a large geographical region at low cost. These costs were regarded low compared to other means of communication. These views confirm the findings of Parsons (2008) that with the use of social media tools such as blogs in Public Relations, the ethical expectation of authorship of content, transparency and credibility have become crucial as the organisation's reputation depends on them. Both Smudde (2005) and Parsons (2008) argue that the readers of the social media sphere expect truth and transparency, therefore lack of disclosure can lead to sudden and wide-spread disrepute.

5.2.3 Discussion on Constraints of Internet as a PR Platform in Organizations

One of the constraints or challenges identified was that of security attacks and complex logging in processes and procedures. There was also challenges of incomplete interactions and loss of trust. Security attacks was rated a major constraint, although most of the participants gave assurances of security measures.

These findings resonated with those of Tavani (2004) who observes that safeguarding privacy and security of the Internet users by not engaging in acts of accessing personal data such as demographic information, credit card details and web pages visited by scanning temporary Internet 'cookies', search engines and stored online forms can be a challenge for modern PR practitioners.

The main issue raised regarding the security of online platforms had to do with the security checks and procedures involved and the logging in processes. The customers said at times they felt that they were not in control of their accounts, especially where

company personnel such as the IT experts or the web designers, came up with the security settings. Literature reviewed, such as Tavani (2004), James (2008) and Phillips (2001), underscored the fact that computer technologies are susceptible to attacks by different hackers, including those responsible for protecting the users' data. Some of the employees may choose to sabotage the systems as a means of venting their disputes or complaints with the organization. In some cases, such attacks could come from cyberactivists or individuals who feel that the organization is not doing well to protect public or certain group interests. Hackers can also be individuals with strictly personal complaints known as cybergrippers (Hallahan, 2004).

Before the advent of internet, especially in organizational management and service delivery, critics were often easily thwarted in their efforts to sabotage company information systems. Under such circumstances, public indifference made mobilizing supporters an arduous task. Sceptical editorial gatekeepers dutifully screened out much defamatory, inaccurate or questionable information from sources. Ponderous government processes also made getting attention or action from lawmakers difficult. However, the internet has accelerated the speed of attacks.

The World Wide Web, online discussion groups and chatrooms, electronic mail, and wireless communications have made it easy for organizers both to reach and to marshal large numbers of people (Coombs, 1998; Heath, 1998; Rheingold, 2002; Taylor, Kent & White, 2001). However, these benefits come with the potential for greater harm both to the organization and the publics by information-based saboteurs.

Another major issue identified by the respondents was that of logging-in security checks applied on the organizations portals. The respondents noted that it was very

complex to login to access services online. Some customers said they easily gave up because of the procedures and processes of filling forms or securing services because they could not keep up with the security checks involved. Stakeholders believed that being unable to connect to referral sites made some customers to miss out on important communications.

The reviewed studies (James, 2008; Hallahan, 2006) also underscore how some organizations have vastly insufficient logging, archiving, correlation and simulation capabilities. This is often because these companies often face a range of significant challenges when it comes to designing and implementing appropriate internet security monitoring and logging strategies. The stakeholders advised that organization need practical guidance to help with monitoring the relevant events on their online systems and networks. They said distrust for online platforms had made some people to shun internet-based PR services. This suggestion by the stakeholders resonated with the view by James (2008) that due to the rising challenges surrounding the effective and ethical application of the Internet tools, Public Relations practitioners need to keep abreast of the technological developments in the online arena.

The respondents also pointed out that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were susceptible to image tainting.

For example, one research participant said that Facebook was open for free communication, but it was a platform that displayed complaints that could potentially be damaging to organizations' image because the information on such platforms was often unverified. Previous studies, such as Alfonso and de Valbuena Miguel (2006), show that hackers are becoming more creative and aggressive posing a threat to online

services. The respondents suggested that, to deal with suspected or actual internet security incidents, it is important to track and document all internet platform security-related events and then thoroughly investigate suspected security breaches.

It was further observed that one organization had closed down customer ratings on its Facebook accounts since majority were giving negative comments. The real-time feedback by customers was an opportunity for such an organization to improve performance and correct mistakes. It is also important for organizations to beware of and appreciate how customers react to their products and services. Misuse or mishandling of online platforms can result in negative organizational image. Previous studies (Middleberg, 2001; Kent, 2008) identify tools for monitoring communication online to establish guidelines and controls. This issue is further reinforced by Kent (2008) who states that the challenge for a practitioner is that controlled messages have the risk of being treated like propaganda in the blogosphere whereas uncontrolled messages have the possibility of being misinterpreted or inadequately placed. Continuous monitoring and control of messages, responses and interactions is of great necessity.

While many employees are tempted to participate in unauthorized online conversations with employees, monitoring helps the management to establish control over the content of online interactions. This will help the management to identify and pre-empt potential internal risks to the online PR platforms.

Organizations must establish internal social media code of conduct to guide employees on their online interactions with colleagues and with the public (Breakenridge, 2008).

Other constraints identified included lack of online information management systems in most organizations, poor content management and monitoring. The respondents said some organizations lacked the tools for monitoring and evaluating of their online PR platforms. The study also found that some organizations were unable to keep up with the overload of information from customers and visitors on the platforms on a daily basis. A study by Dean (2008) supports the fact that internet platforms need to be properly managed to effectively meet its objectives. Another complication in the management of the internet was with determining the responsibility for monitoring and overall management. The respondents identified challenges with role specification (or job description) and difficulties caused by lack of expert knowledge and experience. The study shows internet technology can enhance technical and management only if roles of professionals are specified. Moreover, they said professionals needed to spot trends, monitor emerging issues and tailor messages to public needs.

According to the study participants, challenges and crises with online platforms could be prevented with proper management. Past studies agree that a proper management of internet platforms can help organizations to make quality decisions about their products and services and client engagement strategies (Druck, Fiur & Bates, 1995). Thomsen (1995) also observes that PR professionals need autonomy to establish appropriate management strategies.

Other constraints revealed in the study included challenges from poor integration of PR and communication strategies in the online platforms.

For most organizations, the internet was viewed as passive communication tools that must be supplemented with traditional PR practices. This finding can be explained to

what several studies (Esrock & Leighty, 1999; Thorsteinsson, 2000; Stuntebeck, 2002; Taylor & Perry, 2005) have reported, that many PR practitioners are still largely unaware of the value of the Internet and the scope of its application in the practice. Indeed, many professionals in this study felt that print media were still a better choice. They said the structure of the internet and the use of hypertext creates many opportunities for the author to lose the reader and lose the chance to communicate with them. Further, the respondents questioned if their publics did understand and retain the messages being presented online.

Most participants also pointed out that the internet platforms, especially social media, could only succeed within the framework of a larger communications strategy. However, some respondents believed that customer relations could not be realized online because it was a tactic in an overall communication objective. The participants suggested that it would be more effective if there was a balance of strategies by mixing other methods available. Previous studies posit that the potential problem with internet is that some organizations and agencies are replacing all traditional communication with Internet communication. This finding could explain the observation by Eyrich *et al.* (2008) that practitioners are slow in adopting social media tools that are technologically advanced and/or cater to a niche audience. Evidently, poor integration of PR with internet tools have slowed down progress in the PR-Internet collaboration. Breakenridge (2008) notes that media mix refers to the various advertising channels through which a company communicates with its audience in order to fulfil a campaign as outlined in the media plan. The media mix is the total amount of advertising that an agency, advertising company or media buyer has budgeted for a specific advertising strategy and media plan.

Breakenridge points out that media mix also outlines the amount of the advertising budget that will be allocated to each media channel. In some cases, the best mix for a company is one heavy in TV and online advertising, or a mix of equal parts print, TV and online advertising. However, because every generation of decision makers uses the Internet, all media mixes should include at least a fraction of online advertising methods.

The goal of any media campaign is to get the right message to the target audience in the fastest and most efficient way possible. Therefore, the best media mix for any given campaign depends greatly on the demographics of the target market (Breakenridge, 2008). For example, if a cosmetic company is releasing a new line of lipstick, its media mix is likely to include advertisements in women's fashion magazines, commercials on style-focused networks and a healthy social media presence on online health and beauty communities. From the research, the respondents agreed that internet could never replace face-to-face communication and that PR is about building relations, and this could not always be done on a computer screen.

5.2.4 Discussions on Stakeholders' Perspectives on Constraints of Internet as a PR Platform in Organizations

The interviewed stakeholders stated that being unable to connect to referral sites made many customers to miss out on important communication. The online PR sites were perceived as complicated and that there was minimal feedback from the company representatives. The stakeholders further observed that most consumers lacked the technical skills to ably use the online PR tools.

Other scholars, such as Esrock and Leighty (1999), Lattimore *et al.* (2004) and Broom (2009) agree with these stakeholders' perspectives about interaction, in that the organizations should have management skills for online communication and should therefore have expertise to manage online communication effectively in order to achieve customer satisfaction.

The stakeholders' thought about interaction is that organizations should have management skills for online communication and should therefore have expertise to manage online interaction effectively in order to achieve customer satisfaction. These views confirmed the observations made by Esrock and Leighty (1999) that it is likely that the websites are not managed by Public Relations practitioners but by technical or marketing staff and therefore are not efficient at servicing media requirements. These scholars used the same assumption to explain why the websites were not used to proactively engage with the publics but only as a medium of information dissemination similar to traditional channels such as print and broadcast. Indeed, in this study, interaction was seen to be slow in some platforms according to customers and contrary to reduced visitors to the organization; customers still find themselves soliciting for help by physically visiting the customer care desks.

Other thoughts mentioned were those of security issues in terms of hacking of computers for personal information and therefore platforms not viewed as trustworthy and information not considered private. Majority of the respondents held the view that, although Internet banking is always useful when one has access to the internet and smartphones which have access internet, not everyone is able to be on the internet. Other customers have never had trust on the internet banking due to the case of fraud that had been witnessed in the world and many people lost huge chunks of monies.

These findings affirm those of Yang & Lim (2009) who argue that lack of transparency and credibility on the internet media platforms can lead to distrust of these systems by the intended users.

5.3 Discussion in Relation to Theoretical Perspectives

If the internet is considered a medium or channel to be used as a basis for the management of the relationship between organization and its stakeholders, then online communication management must be practiced using a combination of theories and models such as press agency, public information, two-way asymmetric and two way symmetric. The study contributes important perspectives to these models and other theories of communication and public relations, organization-public relationships, interactivity, and corporate social responsibility among others. The study established that organizations use websites and other internet platforms to maintain good relationships with their publics. This perspective reinforces the view of PR from a systems theoretical approach which emphasizes the interdependence of organizations with their environments, both internal and external to the organization (Rousseau, 2015). It also echoed with the propositions of the Personal influence model (Sriramesh, 1992) which describes how practitioners cultivate good relations with key publics, usually government, and journalists. The monitoring of relationships was a major finding from this study and for PR practice. This finding was also in line with the Two-Way Symmetrical Model which is geared towards building a mutually beneficial relationship between the organization and the public (Grunig, 1992).

PR models describe the purpose of organizational communication as being publicity. The four models (press agency, public information, two-way asymmetric and two way symmetric) differ in purpose – the function they provide for the organisation that

sponsor them (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). According to Grunig and Hunt, the models represent the values, goals, and behaviours held or used by the organisation. The press agency/publicity model describes the purpose of corporate communications as being publicity, trying to gain coverage from mass media in any way possible. It serves a propaganda function and spreads the faith of the organisation involved, often through incomplete information.

Press agency is a one-way communication model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Information is given, but the organization does not seek information from stakeholders through research or informal methods. Therefore, organizations are not always obligated to present a complete image of the organisation or products. The present study relates to this theory given the responsibility of the a PR practitioner, which is to put a convincing report to publicize the organization; getting the organization name into the media; maximum publicity and putting off bad publicity out of the media.

Public information model is seen as the dissemination of information through the media such as newsletters, brochures, direct mail or the internet (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The model is evidently seen from the study as the internet is used to pass information the information in that form. It is a one-way communication model similar to the press agency model. The two-way asymmetrical model is also playing out in this study because we see information flowing between the organisation and its stakeholders. Communication in this model consists more of dialogue than monologue and communication is seen as improving understanding with key stakeholders. The study demonstrated that organizations should monitor and manage their online communication and use appropriate strategies of interaction to bring symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes and behaviours of their stakeholders.

Another theory relevant to the findings of this study is the systems theory. Often, PR practitioners are thought of as boundary spanners, straddling the edge of an organization –looking inside and outside of an organization (Rousseau, 2015). They are the go-betweens, explaining the organization to its stakeholders and interpreting the environment to the organization. PR experts advise the dominant coalition, the primary decision-makers of the organization, about problems and opportunities in the environment and help these decision makers respond to these changes (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000).

The environment imposes constraints on organizations. In the context of the systems theory, one can identify an organization's stakeholders, and by spanning organizational boundaries, anticipate each side's relationship needs even through the internet.

If decision-makers keep their systems open, they allow for the two-way flow of resources and information between the organization and its environment. They use that information for adapting to the environment, or they may use the incoming information to try to control the environment. In light of this research, systems theory was important in explaining the importance of the corporate communication function in the management of the internet. It has indicated how the internet is used to gather information inputs, how it can be used to provide outputs; and how the internet can facilitate the roles of teams, thereby adding value to the organization through the systems approach. These findings agreed with the views of Ashcroft (2001), Macintosh (2000) and Sallot (2004) on the importance of the internet for PR practices in an organization. These scholars concur that the Internet also provides an ideal forum for group communication and interaction.

The dialogic theory of public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002) emphasizes the importance of two-way communication and receiving feedback from an organisation's publics. Kent and Taylor argue meaningful dialogue with stakeholders is important to relationship building. This dialogue can take place on internet through social media and through channels on an organisation's website. From the study data seems to suggest that organization internet platforms are not fully employing the dialogic capacity of the Internet as expected. The internet based tools according to stakeholder perception, do meet some of the prerequisites of dialogue in that they are easy to use, contain useful information, and provide reasons for visitors to remain on the site.

However, the relationship-building capacity of encouraging visitors to return and allowing for visitor interaction are both lacking. One way to bolster organisation-public relationships is by practicing corporate social responsibility.

Kim and Reber (2008) observe that corporate social responsibility is "a central relationship-building activity" (p. 341). Haigh, Brubaker and Whiteside (2013) found stakeholders' perceptions of an organization are more positive after they interact with the organization's Facebook page. This study, however, does not identify dialogic capacity of "generation of return visits" and "conservation of visitors" can be equated with the interpersonal relationship maintenance stage. Repetitive interactions and dialogue form the basis of any successful/ongoing relationship. This "relational maintenance" cluster offers internet visitors reasons why they might remain engaged in dialogue and encourages other visitors to return for further relationship development. It is in dialogic communication that trust and commitment emerge (Taylor *et al.*, 2001).

The research showed the type of communication strategy an organisation employs on its internet platform affects the stakeholders' perceptions of the organisation-public relationship and corporate social responsibility. In the end, when organizations employ a corporate social responsibility strategy, stakeholders' perceptions of the organisation-public relationship were stronger than stakeholders who interacted with platforms employing a corporate ability strategy focusing on the organisation's products.

A document analysis was conducted to determine if there were differences in the type of communication strategy organisations were employing on their internet platforms. It was noted in the study that most organizations did not have an internet strategy. Instead, they had overall communication strategies.

The study also extends the research by identifying different forms of organisational communication (external or internal) available on the online communication platforms. Previous studies by Jo and Kim (2003) have found that organisation-public relationships are bolstered when websites discuss an organisation's community involvement. Community involvement is one form of corporate social responsibility. Kim and Reber (2008) state corporate social responsibility is "a central relationship building activity" (p. 341). There are three types of corporate social responsibility activities, namely: relational (e.g., striving to build long-term relations with its consumers), discretionary (e.g., contributing resources to raise social awareness of issues, and supporting children and family issues), and moral/ethical (e.g., acting responsibly toward the environment) (David, Kline & Dai, 2005). Corporate social responsibility perceptions are moderated by consumers' responses to the type of corporate social responsibility activity an organisation is participating in as well as quality of the product (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the summary of the research findings. The summary follows the research objectives of the study. The chapter also presents the conclusions drawn from the study findings. Lastly, the chapter provides the recommendations of the study. The recommendations begin by highlighting the unique contribution of the study to the field of communication, public relations and human resource. It then examines the implications of the research findings to policy and practice. Thereafter, the section offers suggestions for further research and then a brief overview of the personal experiences of the researcher on the PhD research process.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

The research problem underscored that PR has gained increasing organizational importance in recent times. However, the actual Opportunities of and constraints to online integration of PR practices have not been empirically established. Further, the reviewed literature showed that the use of Internet for PR in organizations has been empirically investigated in other contexts, mainly especially in Europe and America, but not in Africa, and more so in Kenya. Moreover, most of those investigations focused on specific components of Internet and not the holistic use of the internet for PR. This study, therefore, investigated how select organizations utilized the Internet as a PR platform.

The study was guided by the following research questions: What are the Opportunities of Internet as PR platform in organizations? What are the constraints of Internet as a PR platform in organizations? How do stakeholders perceive the Opportunities and constraints of Internet as PR platform in organizations? The researcher purposively sampled 45 participants from the target population from PR departments and key departments of five selected organizations in Kenya. The participants included communications/PR professionals, management, ICT experts and other relevant professionals in the organizations. The study used in-depth interviews, observation and document analysis to generate data. The data was then analysed and presented thematically. The key findings were as summarized in Table 7.1 below.

Table 6.1: Summary of Key Findings

<p>The Opportunities of Internet as PR platform in organizations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities/ Opportunities of Internal and external communication- Customer feedback, social interaction, information sharing at low cost and high speed • Opportunities/ Opportunities to obtain goods and services at the most convenient time and at low or no cost implications because of accessibility of the internet. (consumer Relations) • Opportunities/ Opportunities of Publicity is seen to enhance brand awareness by ensuring large coverage at low costs when compared to print media and television among other forms of publicity. • Opportunities/ Opportunities of Skill acquisition and ability to create content and upload on the internet platforms. Expertise has been enhanced in the area of creating PR messages which include e-newsletters, • Opportunities/ Opportunities for Customer relations and business/investor relations-- has been enhanced through the internet platforms • Opportunities/ Opportunities for online management through monitoring and evaluation of the tools, organization success of online tools through various methods including online research, online reviews and using monitoring tools. Management also done by setting up online customer care centres.
<p>The constraints of Internet as a PR platform in organizations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constraints/ challenges of security procedures and logging in processes while utilizing the internet tools, while constraints of interaction are also encountered from security and trust concerns. • Constraints/ challenges of online information management which includes content management, lack of tools of monitoring and evaluation, management of platforms for appropriate use. And also

Constraints/challenges of misuse of the platforms with messages that can cause negative image, and ineffective utilization of the platforms not in line with the communication objectives.

- Constraints/challenges of expert knowledge, experience and role specification
- Constraints/challenges of integrating PR and communication strategies

Stakeholders perspectives on the Opportunities and constraints of Internet as PR platform in organizations

Opportunities

- Perspectives on accessible and available internet connectivity for information sourcing and sharing with a lot of ease. Perceived immediate feedback elicited from the platforms and also the thoughts of easy access of goods and services either through procurement and supplies processes for some corporations.
- Organizational communication for the release of press statements, press release, fact sheet, organizational mission, vision, values of the organizations was perspective as a properly personalized tool available to communicate the corporate messages.
- On personalization, the stakeholders perceived the internet tools to obtain goods and services as secure because of the security checks and logging in processes involved.
- On perspectives of internet productivity, the internet platform was seen as tools with the ability to pass a lot of information over a large geographical region at low costs.

Constraints

- Perspectives on constraints/ challenges of navigating through the internet, stakeholders think that being unable to connect to referring sites leads to miss communication or communication barriers. Users are likely to get lost in the process of connecting to sites. The sites are perceived to be complicated and in the process minimal feedback is solicited.
- Stakeholders also thought that to be able to use the internet for various things, one needed to be computer savvy and have knowledge on the use of the tools.
- The stakeholders thoughts about interaction is that organizations should have management skills for online communication and should therefore have expertise to manage online communication effectively in order to achieve customer satisfaction.
- Other thoughts mentioned where those of security issues in terms of hacking of computers for personal information and therefore platforms not viewed as trustworthy and information not considered private.

6.3 Conclusion

The study found that internet platforms available for PR in organizations are diverse ranging from websites, Facebooks, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, live chats, google+ and

internet banking applications etc. The internet presents a lot of Opportunities/opportunities for PR. The study provides insights on how the industry utilizes the internet in an environment with other integrated media and communication strategies and how they affect organizational communication over time. The study also found that organizations are not fully employing the dialogic or interaction capacity of the Internet as expected. The study reveals that the platforms do meet some of the prerequisites of dialogue in that they are easy to use, contain useful information, and provide reasons for visitors to remain on the site.

However, the relationship-building capacity of encouraging visitors to return and allowing for visitor interaction are both lacking. Two major issues emerged from the study: a technical issues emanating from processes and procedures of management, expertise and design/intent issues including “ease of use,” “usefulness of information,” and “conservation of visitors,” and a interactivity or dialogue, incorporating opportunities for a “dialogic circle” and “generating return visits.” These issues provide insight into the constraints/challenges of fostering Internet as a Public relations platform.

Previous studies provided a predictive framework that showed the evolution of internet tools such as social media and its mainstreaming into communication and public relations. Participants, especially the PR professionals, agreed that Internet is a valuable platform if used correctly and integrated into a well-rounded communication strategy as well as management in areas of monitoring and evaluation. Further the study found that stakeholders perceive online tools as equally useful in terms of

product awareness, information and service delivery. However, various constraints impede the fostering customer relations via internet-based PR practices.

6.4 My Thesis and Contributions of the Study

My thesis is that, although organizations have internet platforms for PR, some have realized limited benefits of unsuccessful internet based tools. Internet is a very valuable platform for PR in organizations. Although the study demonstrates the opportunities of internet for PR, constraints in the platforms bring an inevitable changing relationship between the media and the public. The study findings add to the field Communication and public relations and specifically to the area of internet and PR.

From the findings, it is clear that the internet does not only allow organizations to reach specific publics but is also a valuable media for fostering public relationships in organizations. Real-time, one-on-one conversations are unprecedented on the internet platforms.

The opportunity to connect instantly with an audience and often receive a rapid response offers an effective means to communicate. On the other hand, the study highlights the challenges associated with the use of these internet platforms identifies for PR. Finally, this study contributes towards the appreciation of the qualitative methodology applied. Moreover, the study adds to the current body of knowledge in the field of communication and PR. It further provides a context and reference point for academics, policy makers, business, and PR departments in various organizations.

6.5 Recommendations –(Implications for Policy and Practice)

The findings provide the case for implementation of the opportunities of the Internet for Public Relations in organizations while minimizing the constraints. This study also provides public relations professionals in organisations with guidelines on how to craft messages for the platforms. Organizational management and PR professionals need to develop strategies to take advantage of the interactivity internet platform services provide. Practitioners should develop internet plans to bolster interactivity and utilize social media services fully to produce effective messages to strengthen organisation-public relationships. Stakeholders should also identify the internet tools that are useful in fostering customer satisfaction.

6.6 Suggestions for Further Research

Studies on the internet and PR in Kenya are scarce. Yet, there is more to learn about internet and communication with stakeholders and the general public. More studies are needed to determine the impact of specific tools such as social media and websites among other forms of social networking sites on organizations. Moreover, future research should focus on stakeholders' views after they interact with a website or social media platforms.

An experimental study should be carried out in which organizations practicing PR in Kenya use social media application such as Facebook to provide the benefits of using these platforms. In addition, future research could replicate this study with lower-level PR practitioners.

Finally, a study that combines communication theory with the communication methods of internet-based tools will help organizations and PR practitioners to understand how

these tools define how people communicate and the best way to reach different publics in their own language. It would be valuable to establish whether similar results could be achieved with other forms of organizations such as academic institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

6.7 Reflections on the PhD Research Process

According to Marshall *et al.* (2010) and Gerrish and Lacey (2006), reflexivity is the ability of the researcher to look back on the research process and challenge their own perceptions, beliefs, views, experiences and its influences on the research process and interpretation. Reflexivity is also used in qualitative research to validate research practices and expose any assumptions and biases that could influence the study (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 2002; Morrow, 2006). It is a process in which the researcher critically evaluates the data taking into consideration their understanding of the subject and driven by what the researcher is interested on the subject (Bruce, 2007).

There is epistemology which is a consideration of relationships between the productions of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the known (Jackson, 2013). The common epistemological positions are the positivist and interpretivist. The other approach is ontology which is the involvement and impact of knowledge producer or research. There are ontological positions objectivism/ realism that view a real world out there independent of our knowledge and the second is constructivism/relativism which views the world as socially constructed (Furlong & Marsh, 2010).

My standpoint in this study was on the relativist ontological position and an interpretivism epistemological paradigm. In this study, knowledge was generated from

the participants' views, perceptions of the use of Internet for PR activities. Participants were interacted with through in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis with experienced and knowledgeable people in the organization. The interest was to gain deeper understanding of meaning organizations have constructed on Internet use as PR platform and how they perceive and make sense of their organizations and the experiences they have. The study therefore utilized the relativist-interpretivist research paradigm and a qualitative approach utilizing the multiple case study method were adopted. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants selected from PR departments of selected organizations in Kenya.

My experiences as a lecturer of Communication Studies did not influence my views in this research. However, they provided me with insights into probing further on the opportunities and challenges of internet as PR platform in organizations. I developed this area of interest in the process of teaching communication and public relations and media studies courses. I also got interested in this area because of the changing media and communication environment.

Gaining access to the research area was a major challenge. I sought permission from NACOSTI and thereafter had to seek permission from the respective organizations. Getting appointments from the participants was the most challenging experience in my study.

I got appointment cancellation many times because of the busy nature of the respondents I was dealing with. In fact, some interviews were done in two phases. Four participants chose to participate by phone for the interview, and were called between as requested. The remaining 21 respondents completed the interviews face-to-

face and responding by email and follow-up phone calls. On request, respondents were given the interview guide by email, but occasionally chose not to answer all the questions orally but answered by email.

Upon completion of the phone and face-to-face interviews, participants were asked to elaborate on any of the information that arose during the interview process. The emailed interview guides included an opening statement that asked respondents to elaborate as they saw fit. After reading the consent form, some respondents agreed to the terms of general attribution. However, some respondents requested that they not be quoted directly. After I completed the interviews, I transcribed the phone interviews and printed the email responses and read over them several times to discover any trends and patterns regarding the respondents' answers. I grouped specific answers by theme words and by similar responses. Occasionally, a respondent offered significant insight that fell outside of the theme categories, but I included the information based on importance and relevance to the research questions.

Each day of data collection gave rise to volumes of data. I did a summary of the major points at the end of each interview, document analysis and observation and shared with participants during the next interview. I listened to the audio recorded tapes several times to make meaning of what participants were saying. I transcribed all recordings verbatim before data analysis began. I read and reread the transcripts, including those by email to make sense and to get a deeper understanding and meaning of emerging themes which helped in refining themes.

Thematic analysis was used during analysis of data whereby data was analysed in three stages beginning from coding data to define basic themes then clusters of basic themes

forming organizational themes and finally global themes. Analysis of data was also done per phase of study that made it easy to handle the data. Coded transcripts were also shared with supervisors who gave their input.

During data writing, I moved back and forth to develop understanding and achieve saturation. A process called Iteration not as a repetitive mechanical task but as a deeply reflexive process, key to sparking insight and developing meaning. Reflexive iteration is at the heart of visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understandings. Qualitative research patterns and themes emerge from interpretation and views held by the researcher. They are driven by what the inquirer wants to know and how the inquirer interprets what the data are telling her or him according to subscribed theoretical frameworks, subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological positions, and intuitive field understandings. Rather than being an objectivist application of analysis procedures, the process is highly reflexive (Bruce, 2007; Harper, 2003; Mauthner, 2003). I also used participants' quotes and words in writing of research findings. In conclusion, my study added a lot of knowledge the fields of Public Relations and Internet and the practice of PR in organizations generally. It was a tedious but didactic experience.

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APENDICES

APENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Basic facts and organizations background

- a. Respondent's name(s)(optional), position, role/ department in the organization
- b. Which institution
- c. What products offered
- d. Target publics
- e. Organizations ownership, employees, structure, competitors
- f. Roles and Organizational Objectives

A general question

- (a) Please tell me about PR in your organization? (VERY KEY- In comparison with traditional forms)**

Field Research Questions

Question 1. What are the Opportunities of Internet as PR platform in organizations?

- How do you utilize internet platforms for PR in your organization? (twitter, facebook, blogs, websites, emails etc)
- What opportunities (advantages) does the internet present for PR? (accessibility, availability, and speed is concerned)
- How has the organization personalized the internet for PR purpose?
- How do you ensure interactivity and how do you monitor the interactions in the platforms identified for PR?(track communication and provide feedback)
- How productive is the internet platforms for the organization?
- How do you monitor and eventually evaluate the success of the platforms utilized?
- Explain any issues about the internet and PR not asked you about?

Question 2. What are the constraints of Internet as a PR platform in organizations?

- What difficulties you face in terms of utilizing the internet platforms for PR in your organization? (twitter, facebook, blogs, websites, emails etc?)

- What challenges (constraints) does the platforms present for PR ?
- Any challenges on personalization of the internet platform for PR?
- What challenges or constrains have you encountered in interactivity in the platforms identified for PR?(challenges of tracking communication)
- What do you think are causes of problems you face while utilizing the internet for PR in your organizations?
- What are some of the challenges you face on monitoring of the platforms utilized?
- Generally, what are the challenges surrounding the use of internet for PR purposes? And what do you suggest to solve the problems?

Question3. How do stakeholders perceive Opportunities and constraints of Internet as PR platform in organizations?

Opportunities

- Comment on the availability and accessibility of internet to obtain serves?
- Comment on the utilization of internet generally to obtain services?
- How has the internet tools been personalized for you as a customer?
- What are your perspectives on opportunities and productivity of internet for service delivery?

Constraints

- Kindly, tell me what challenges you face while utilizing the internet for different services?
- As a customer, how do you interact with your service providers through the net?
- Comment on the constraints of productivity of internet platforms for you as a stakeholder?

A general question

- Explain any issues about the use of internet for service provision that I have not asked you about?

APENDIX II: OBSERVATION GUIDE

I will engage direct observation technique to monitor how these activities are conducted to answer the research questions. **(In comparison with traditional forms)**

Question 1. What are the Opportunities of Internet as PR platform in organizations?

- Setting of the work place to establish opportunities -variety of platform (platform, twitter, facebook, blogs, websites, emails etc? Utilized as PR platforms.
- Evidence of equipment and technology to establish accessibility, availability and speed.
- Interactivity and communication with customers and stakeholders (track communication and capture if possible with permission) on the platform identified.

Question 2. What are the constraints of Internet as a PR platform in organizations?

- Difficulties of the availability internet for PR purposes.
- Difficulties in interaction and communication with customers.
- The number of staff attending to customers through the internet

Question 3. How do stakeholders perceive Opportunities and constraints of Internet as PR platform in organizations?

- Identify customization, personalization on the internet tools
- The available apps for customer service and how accessible.
- Customer and service providers interactions and participation
- The communication process to establish productivity.

A general observation

- Other emerging matters in connection to internet as PR platform

APENDIX III: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS GUIDE

Document analysis will be used to investigate the activities, strategies and decisions of the organization on the use of internet for PR. To attempt to answer the research questions.

Question 1. What are the Opportunities of Internet as PR platform in organizations?

- Policy documents of the organization (information communication policies, social media policy etc)
- Assessment the organization strategic plan –areas touching on PR and Communication, objectives, vision, mission and structure (focusing on Communication and PR.
- Advertising and Marketing, and communication documents available in the organization website, and other online tools.
- Online journals, magazines, newsletters, and other articles available in the organization website.

Question 2. What are the constraints of Internet as a PR platform in organizations?

- Analysis of challenges on implementation of policies.
- Difficulties of the strategic plan communication and implementation.
- Analyze the internet platforms and communication tools available.
- Constraints of accessibility and update of online journals

Question 3. How do stakeholders perceive Opportunities and constraints of Internet as PR platform in organizations?

- Analyze documents available to take holders
- Analyze the internet tools available to customers

A general analysis Other emerging issues in connection to the internet as a PR platform

APENDIX V: FIELD WORK PLAN

Table 8.5

	DATE	WEEK	ACTIVITY	ORGANISATION
1	November 2017- December 2017	8	Pilot Study and Amendment of Research Tools	Equity Bank- Nairobi Head Office
2	January 2018- February 2018	8	Interviews and Observation	All research sites
3	March 2018	4	Document Analysis	All research sites
4	April 2018	4	Data Transcription and Presentation	-
5	May 2018	4	Data Analysis	
6	June 2018-July 2018	4	Discussion and Conclusion chapters, Revision of chapter 1,2,3 and 4	-
7	August 2018-September 2018	8	Submission of 1st and 2 nd drafts	-
8	October 2018		Defense of Research Report	Moi University
9	November 2018		Correction and Submission	Moi University

APENDIX VI: RESEARCH BUDGET**Proposed Research budget for Studying Selected Organizations**

a) Pilot study.....	40,000/=
b) Transport Costs.....	40,000/=
c) Research Administrative Costs.....	100,000/=
d) Contingency.....	30,000/=
Total.....	210,000/=

APPENDIX VII: INTRODUCTORY LETTERS

**Department of Communication Studies,
School of Human Resource Development,
Moi University
P.O BOX 3900-30100
Eldoret, Kenya
November 16, 2016
The Managing Director,**

.....

**P.O BOX.....
NAIROBI
Dear Sir/Madam,**

RE: Opportunities and Constraints of the Internet as a Public Relations Platform: A multiple Case Study of Selected organizations in Kenya.

I am a PhD candidate of Moi University researching on the above topic. I am asking for permission to interview some staff members and stakeholders in your organization. I will also observe the research site and review documents in connection with my research.

The study will hopefully provide a basis for the utilization of Internet for Public Relations in Organisations in Kenya. I will also contribute to knowledge in the field of Communication and Public Relations. I will therefore ensure confidentiality with the findings. No source of information will be identified without permission.

For further information please contact the Dean, School of Human Resource Development on Tel: 053 20 43153. You can also contact me through my cell phone number. +254 722 863 047.

Yours sincerely,

Jane C. Malel



MOI UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT
DEAN'S OFFICE

P.O. Box 3900
 ELDORET
 KENYA.

Tel./Fax 254-053-43153/43620 Ext.434

8th March, 2016

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: JANE C. MALEL - SHRD/PHDC/05/13

This is to confirm that the above named is a Ph.D student in the Department of Communication Studies, School of Human Resource Development undertaking Ph.D course in Communication Studies.

She has successfully finished her coursework, submitted her thesis proposal for examination entitled "*Affordances and Constraints of Internet use as Public Relations Platform: A Multiple Case Study of Organization in Kenya.*" and she has been cleared to proceed to the field for data collection.

Any assistance accorded to her will be highly appreciated.

Yours faithfully




DR. RUTH J. TUBEY
DEAN, SCHOOL OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

/mc

APPENDIX VIII: RESEARCH AUTHORIZATION



NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

Telephone: +254-20-2213471,
2241349, 3310571, 2219420
Fax: +254-20-318245, 318249
Email: dg@nacosti.go.ke
Website: www.nacosti.go.ke
when replying please quote

9th Floor, Utalii House
Uhuru Highway
P.O. Box 30623-00100
NAIROBI-KENYA

Ref. No. **NACOSTI/P/16/25406/14775**

Date:

16th November, 2016

Jane Chebet Malel
Moi University
P.O. Box 3900-30100
ELDORET.

RE: RESEARCH AUTHORIZATION

Following your application for authority to carry out research on *"Affordances and constraints of the internet as a public relations platform: A multiple case study of selected organisations in Kenya,"* I am pleased to inform you that you have been authorized to undertake research in **Nairobi County** for the period ending **16th November, 2017**.

You are advised to report to the **Chief Executive Officers of selected Organisations, the County Commissioner and the County Director of Education, Nairobi County** before embarking on the research project.

On completion of the research, you are expected to submit **two hard copies and one soft copy in pdf** of the research report/thesis to our office.


DR. M. K. RUGUT, PhD, HSC.
DIRECTOR-GENERAL/CEO

Copy to:


The Chief Executive Officers
Selected Organisations.

The County Commissioner
Nairobi County.

APPENDIX IX: RESEARCH PERMIT

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT:
MISS. JANE CHEBET MALEL
of MOI UNIVERSITY, ELDORET, 0-30100
ELDORET, has been permitted to conduct
research in Nairobi County
on the topic: AFFORDANCES AND
CONSTRAINTS OF THE INTERNET AS A
PUBLIC RELATIONS PLATFORM: A
MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF SELECTED
ORGANISATIONS IN KENYA
for the period ending:
16th November, 2017

Permit No : NACOSTI/P/16/25406/14775
Date Of Issue : 16th November, 2016
Fee Received :Ksh 2000




[Signature]
Applicant's Signature


[Signature]
Director General
National Commission for Science, Technology & Innovation

CONDITIONS

1. You must report to the County Commissioner and the County Education Officer of the area before embarking on your research. Failure to do that may lead to the cancellation of your permit.
2. Government Officer will not be interviewed without prior appointment.
3. No questionnaire will be used unless it has been approved.
4. Excavation, filming and collection of biological specimens are subject to further permission from the relevant Government Ministries.
5. You are required to submit at least two(2) hard copies and one (1) soft copy of your final report.
6. The Government of Kenya reserves the right to modify the conditions of this permit including its cancellation without notice



REPUBLIC OF KENYA



National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation
RESEACH CLEARANCE PERMIT
Serial No. A11935
CONDITIONS: see back page