The Evolution of Public Relations in a Digital World

How PR practices have changed with the rise of social media

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ABSTRACT

This paper aimed to research new phenomena in PR practice since the rise of social media. Much of the literature on this topic is quite outdated and doesn't properly take recent changes in the fields into consideration. For this reason, it was important to conduct a study based on these new changes in the profession of PR. This paper studied the way in which PR practitioners perceived their profession to have changed since the rise and wide-spread adoption of social media platforms. This research was conducted through an in-depth interviewing process with PR practitioners. These interviews were then analyzed and interpreted using the grounded theory approach and coding. Overall, ten practitioners were interviewed with an average duration of around 45 minutes per interview. The results of the interviews outlined several elements of their profession which were experiencing changes due to the rise of social media platforms. They first outlined the element of networks and information as social media enables practitioners to create and maintain strong connections with sources and contacts whilst also staying updated with relevant trends. The second element which was explained was that of building and maintaining a reputation and positive public image, a core element to PR. The strategies related to building this reputation along with the values of the companies were outlined in relation to social media as being an important platform to enforce these. Following, the reach of the company and communication with the public was discussed as they explained how social media enables conversation with the public along with facilitating the spread of information and gaining visibility online. Finally, certain limitations to the literature and theory were outlined as the practitioners gave their insights into the changing roles in PR, it become a multi-faceted practice, incorporating many different fields into the same roles. Social media ambivalence was also a main issue for the practitioners as they explained social media to be more of an important external factor to consider rather than a tool they can leverage for PR practices. All in all, this research was able to outline certain discrepancies between theory and literature and real-life practices of PR professionals. It was able to outline the importance of considering social media whilst also explaining the limits of it as a tool.

KEYWORDS: *social media, public relations, crisis management, digital age, PR development*

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1. Introduction

Public relations have been defined throughout the years in numerous ways by many different scholars. There are several differing perspectives on the profession of public relations. As a whole, when looking into the definitions provided by a range of academics, one can note that there is a general agreement that public relations is responsible for creating and maintaining communications and relationships with the public for any given organisation. Public relations practitioners have to keep up to date with trends, predict consequences and counsel the organisation in order for it to maintain a positive public image. Alongside this, they are also responsible for issues management, maintaining reputations and relationships as well as risk communication and corporate social responsibility (Theaker & Yaxley, 2017).

In recent years, however, the practice of public relations has been changing rapidly with the rise of new platforms in the digital age, namely the emergence and rapid growth of social media (Grunig, 2009). Before the widespread adoption of the World Wide Web, public relations efforts were made through controlled publishing, going through many filters before reaching the public. The main strategy for spreading a message and reaching larger audiences was through advertising. With the rise of many social media platforms, these messages can be produced and spread at a much faster pace, and in a much simpler way (Hill & White, 2000). Many of the old strategies used in public relations are no longer relevant or effective in today's digital world (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). The large masses present on social media have even shifted the practice to become a professional phenomenon. Increasingly, businesses are using modern media formats to get in touch with the consumers and foster a favourable public image online (Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012; Grunig, 2009). With the rise of the internet and a variety of new platforms, much has changed in the digital realm. These platforms enable groups to emerge and have a stronger voice, being heard by a much larger audience with the rapid spreading of information online. These groups can be made up of any user, with the emergence of user-generated-content, which has changed every element of the media and communications field (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). A bit over a decade ago, information was being spread by particular individuals, such as journalists, and was targeted toward their particular audiences. Nowadays with social media, these dynamics have drastically changed as users can easily share content with their peers (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009; Grunig 2009). This does, however, enable public relations professionals to extend their influence and spread their story much further than ever before (DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011). Companies are increasingly targeting the younger generations, namely millennials, and as an article by Forbes Magazine has stated, this generation accredits a lot of meaning to the element of transparency in a company. It is said that over 94%, of the 2000 respondents in the survey, stated that they would remain loyal to a particular brand if that brand was transparent about their practices and values. They also stated that these consumers rely much more heavily on the internet and so they would be far more willing to buy from a brand with a strong online presence (Karapetian, 2017). It is for this reason that it has become crucial that a company be present on the large social media platforms and be active on these in order to attract the 'right' consumers as well as ensure that they maintain a positive reputation.

Despite all the positive elements of the rise of social media, and companies' presence on them, there are also many risks involved with such a large audience and their power to easily and directly influence others. There is much more room for mistakes in the digital age with information spreading at a rapid pace and a lack of rules and regulations surrounding it. Any statement that is remotely inappropriate can become a trending hashtag in this new era of #boycott. Such mistakes can easily occur, and strategies have to be developed to prevent these issues from happening or mitigate them when they do (Theaker & Yaxley, 2017). Many examples have arisen over the past few years with companies being involved in major controversies due to inappropriate comments or behaviour online, some examples including: Chick-fil-A, Elon Musk, Cathy Griffin, Uber, amongst many others.

Social media remains an unregulated domain with limited rules or guidelines to ensure successful communications and conduct. For companies this can be a complicated matter due to the large reach that these platforms have as well as the opportunities they may bring to the companies (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). In the digital age, where social media takes the forefront in many professional fields, it is important to understand what kind of conduct is needed to make use of it. There are many risks involved when it comes to online communications and activities, as previously emphasized with the rising popularity of the '#boycott movement'. The risk of companies offending people, even inadvertently, and having that offense turned into a widespread negative conversation online has drastically increased in recent years (Phillips & Young, 2009). The profession of public relations is very much involved with the tailoring of a public image, which includes social media activities, but also risk and issues management. Many academics such as Regester and Larkin (2008), Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith (2008) as well as Dougall (2008) have addressed and studied issues management and even outlined the specific steps to take to address them but there is lacking literature on the changes that social media bring to this field. Social media is yet to be properly incorporated into the discussion of issues management as the cause of such issues or the solution to them may lie in social networks themselves. (Kent & Taylor, 2010). For this reason, it is of paramount importance to dedicate research to this new phenomenon in public relations in order to properly understand how to use it correctly and be able to develop strategies in relation to it.

Due to the shift in practicing public relations with the rise of the social media era, it is very relevant to study what new public relations professionals do to keep up with ever changing trends, and how they develop strategies to attract consumers, maintain a positive reputation and make up for mistakes which may have been committed in the past. Given these factors, this thesis will examine the following research question: How do public relations professionals perceive and respond to the changes in their profession with the emergence of new social media practices?

In order to attempt to answer this question, this research will make use of qualitative data collection through the means of in-depth interviewing, followed by a grounded theory analysis. These interviews are mainly being conducted in the start-up tech scene, largely based in and around Amsterdam. The participants largely hold a high position in their company and either directly work in or manage a team for public relations activities, including social media content. The time period that this research is mainly focusing on is from the rise of the major social media platforms, onwards. This would be the early 2000s onwards, with the emergence of Facebook and Twitter being around 2006, these platforms became increasingly important and widespread toward 2010. The question would thus be focused on the changes in public relations practices in the 21st century; the digital age.

The following section will outline the different chapters to this research paper. The first section of this paper will analyse existing literature and theory on the topic; it will delve into studies about characterising crises, issues and risk management and will end by discussing social media's role in these. The second section will discuss the methodology and give details into the interviewing method as well as analysis and coding frame along with the interview guide and outline the sample and participants. The third section will then move on to discuss the results of the research, based largely on the interviews and responses that are gathered as well as the coding frame which was created. Finally, the paper will conclude on its findings, outline any limitations and suggest potential research that could be conducted in the future on this topic.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Characterisation of a crisis

According to Kathleen Fearn-Banks, a crisis communication specialist, a crisis can be categorised as “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organisation, company, or industry as well as its public, products, services, or good name” (Fearn-Banks, 2010, p. 2). Through this quote one can note that a crisis can have different levels of harm to a company. A crisis can be characterised by broader, unexpected disasters but also changes in public opinion, which can strongly affect the reputation of a company. Another crisis communication specialist, Otto Lerbinger, states that there are, on average, 8 different types of crises: “natural, technological, confrontation, malevolence, skewed management values, deception, management misconduct and the more general business and economic” (Lerbinger, as cited by Watson & Noble, 2014, p. 139), showing that the cause of a crisis can derive from multiple different sources, making it more complicated to address these issues.

Although Lerbinger points to many different sources where issues can emerge, in the digital age it can be said that the main issue to look into when crises affect a company are the pressure groups which are making these crises come to light. These pressure groups most often gain attention by attempting to get support from the public, creating a type of community to take charge against the organisation at fault, pressuring them to change. They can do so by mobilising people to write to the company about their misconduct and pressure them to change their ways. An even more effective strategy which is put to use is to start a boycott of the company (Regester & Larkin, 2008). An example in which one can see the effectiveness of such strategies is when Lufthansa stopped transporting animals for laboratory testing after a group fighting against these policies came forward. They launched a campaign in which they attempted to convince consumers to buy tickets from different airlines. Lufthansa changed these policies only 10 days after this campaign was launched (Regester & Larkin, 2008, p. 25). And so, one can note that pressure from the public is a significant, and often primary, factor in forcing companies to change their ways in order to prevent any harm to their public image and also, most especially, their revenues. This outlines the importance of keeping a positive public image and maintaining a good reputation, in order to minimise any risks for the company. This is an element which, later in the study, can be addressed during the interviews in order to understand what PR professionals have to do to keep up with shifting opinions from the public, ensuring they maintain a positive image.

2.2. The development of a crisis

Many scholars have outlined the different stages of how a PR issue can develop into a full blown PR crisis, or even a PR disaster. Though various assessments have been developed by scholars, they all tend to follow a basic pattern. An example of this, would be the similarity of the stages outlined by communication specialists Regester and Larkin (2008), and those presented by the Institute of Public Relations. Both discuss the stages that constitute the development of a PR crisis and categorise them into 4 and 5 stages, respectively, as also represented in *Figure 1* below. They outline, firstly, the early stage of the crisis, the *origin* (Dougall, 2008; Ndlela, 2019), in which the issue is identified and a perceived problem is attached to it. This stage is important as groups start raising awareness about the issue (Regester & Larkin, 2008; Theaker, 2016). The second stage is described as the *emerging* stage, in which groups start drawing lines and attract more support, bringing the issue to light (Dougall, 2008). In this stage the issue starts becoming more public, pressuring the company to recognise that there is an issue, and therefore the potential risk of a PR crisis developing. At this moment it is still relatively easy to overcome the issue if the company takes action (Regester & Larkin, 2008; Theaker, 2016). One key challenge, however, is that it is difficult at this point in time to determine whether an issue is urgent or will become problematic enough to require mitigation, which is why many companies do not yet act at this stage (Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006). The main factor that makes an issue evolve into a crisis is the media coverage of it, which increases as time goes by.

The third stage is described by the Institute of Public Relations as the '*current* stage' in which the issue is taking a forefront (Dougall, 2008). This is when positions start to solidify, and groups start pushing for a resolution. The issue increasingly gets more attention and influencers start getting involved, making it more and more difficult for the company to address and deal with the issue (Regester & Larkin, 2008). The issue then reaches a *crisis* stage (Dougall, 2008), in which the issue has fully emerged and caught the attention of the broader public. At this point, it is clear that a PR crisis has developed and the actions required to deal with it become increasingly challenging (Regester & Larkin, 2008; Theaker, 2016). Finally, the Institute suggests that there is one additional stage, that of being *dormant*, in which the crisis is no longer in the forefront of the public eye (Dougall, 2008). An understanding of the various stages leading up to a PR crisis is crucial in understanding how PR professionals act in order to prevent or mitigate them.

Regester and Larkin (2008) as well as Johnson (2017), emphasise the importance of *early action* in dealing with such issues to prevent them from developing into full blown crises. They claim that businesses are starting to change the way they consider these issues, stating that there are commercial and social benefits to being transparent about the steps they take to handle any given issue. One example of this would be more and more companies now issuing environmental statements to demonstrate their efforts to the public (Regester & Larkin, 2008). This point is crucial to understanding the processes that PR professionals have to go through when faced with an issue in the company they work for. This will help to understand at what point during a crisis the PR professional has to start considering action in order to keep an issue from developing into a crisis, and in extreme cases, a PR disaster. The steps that professionals take in order to manage an issue in a company is an important element of this paper and thus it is crucial to understand what studies have already concluded on the processes of issues management and how these compare to actual practices of PR professionals nowadays.

	Scholar	**Steps and Stages**				
Development of a crisis	*Institute of Public Relations (Dougall)*	early	emergent	current	crisis	dormant
	Regester & Larkin	origin of crisis	emerging	resolution	awareness	

Figure 1 - Development of a crisis

2.3. Overcoming an issue or crisis

Having gone into the stages of how an issue develops, it is also important to outline the process of addressing and dealing with the issue. A model which elaborates on this process is called the Chase/Jones Issues Management Process Model. The first step to this is to identify the origin of the issue, which is often times very difficult as it rarely comes from one single place. They claim that the main element of success in this strategy is to place the organisation in the middle and as the main source of information for reporting on the issue. Regester and Larkin (2008) claim that if the situation is handled openly and in an honest way, the media will act responsibly and cover it as such. If the company covers up parts of the story there is the running risk that this will be discovered and will further harm the image of the company and discredit any of their claims (Watson & Noble, 2014).

Similarly to the aforementioned stages through which PR crises develop, there are also common trends in how scholars define the stages in which organisations deal with a crisis or issue. Dougall (2008) describes the Chase/Jones Model and the stages they delineate to explain the dealing with an issue, which they categorised into 7 stages. A similar outline was given by Fearn-Banks (2010), however hers was outlined in only 5 stages, as demonstrated in *Figure 2*. Both scholars describe the first stage to be the *detection phase* in which one monitors the media and what is being said by the public on the issue (Theaker, 2016). The second stage outlined by Dougall (2008) is that of *identification* in which one assesses important elements and tries to identify a new pattern (Ndlela, 2019). The third stage, as described by Fearn-Banks (2010) is that of *prevention and preparation* in which one monitors and plans to avoid a crisis for when it does emerge (Theaker, 2016; Ndlela, 2019). One could argue that the following two stages outlined by Dougall (2008) form part of the prevention and preparation stage described by Fearn-Banks (2010). These two stages are: *prioritisation*, in which one assesses what is at stake and how far reaching the issue's impact is; and *analysis*, in which one analyzes the most important issues in detail, develops a team if needed, and determines the impact the issue or crisis may have (Ndlela, 2019). The third step for Fearn-Banks (2010), and fifth for Dougall (2008), is that of *containment*, in which one identifies the target groups and takes steps to limit the effects of the crisis (Ndlela, 2019). Following this, Dougall (2008) states that this is the phase in which all the strategies are implemented. For Fearn-Banks (2010) this step is followed by the *recovery* from the crisis; in which an organisation takes steps to recover from the damages made to its public image. Finally, the last stage of dealing with a crisis, as agreed by both scholars is that of *evaluation and learning,* in which the company evaluates the losses and assesses the success of the strategies (Fearn-Banks, 2010; Dougall, 2008; Ndlela, 2019; Theaker, 2016)

There are thus many different strategies which have been developed throughout the years and for this reason it is essential to look into the ones which are being put to use nowadays, with the rise of social media practices. This very much helped form the basis of the research and so the interviewees were also questioned on their strategies for assessing harm and potential actions that will be taken when a potential crisis occurs. These stages are indeed mentioned throughout the interviews and for this reason it is helpful to understand the underlying theory.

	Scholar	**Steps and Stages**							
Dealing with an issue	*Fearn-Banks*	detection		prevention & preparation		containment		recovery	learning
	Chase/Jones (Dougall)	monitoring	identification	prioritization	analysis	strategy decision	implementation		evaluation

Figure 2 - Dealing with an issue

2.4. The role of Social Media

2.4.1. Rising social media use

The rapid rise of social media has had a wide range of effects on public relations. The usage of social media has been progressively increasing over the past few years. As of March 2019, Facebook confirmed that it had 2.83 billion monthly active users globally, many of which used the platform on a daily basis (Newsroom.fb.com, 2019). This usage of social media has even shifted to educational and professional spheres. These platforms have been put to use to create brand communities as well as advertising campaigns (Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012). Social media first reached the public between 2000-2003 with the emergence of social networking sites such as LinkedIn and Myspace; it extended further in 2004-2006 with the rise of YouTube and Facebook and finally in 2007 when Twitter first became popular (Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012). Social media has proven to provide both benefits and threats for different practices. This can be seen in public relations, in which traditional forms of media have almost become obsolete as social media has taken its place as the primary tool for communication. Now, a company needs to be very active on these sites, monitoring comments made about them and make use of it when a potential crisis comes forth (Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012; Moreno et al., 2015).

Nowadays, when studying publications related to public relations one can note that a large amount of them mention or discuss the new power of social media and its contributions to this professional field. This can especially be seen when studying publications from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), wherein 8 seminars took place in 2009 which had the sole purpose of discussing social media as a new trend. The apparent consensus emphasises the inherent importance of social media in public relations as a tool for communication in today's world (Kent & Taylor, 2010; Valentini, 2015). It is no longer a matter of 'if' social media should be incorporated but rather 'how'. This subject has even extended its reach to scholarly and educational circles with many more classes being organised around this topic in schools. Despite such discussions on its importance, very little research has been done to prove the effectiveness of this technology in improving communication between companies and its public (Kent & Taylor, 2010, Moreno et al., 2015).

Technology has taken up a huge role in public relations and very few experts would disagree about its importance (Kent & Taylor, 2010; Moreno et al., 2015). These discussions about the importance of using technology in public relations first emerged around 1997 when Johnson created a survey to assess how much the World Wide Web was being used. Following this, many more articles were published examining what is known as the two-way communication method, whereby online communications allow a more direct form of interaction between organisations and the public (Johnson, as cited by Kent & Taylor, 2010). Nowadays, there is a large range of articles which discuss the usage of these technologies and attempt to outline how they should be incorporated in the business world. The fact that social media revolves around consumer-generated content makes it crucial for companies to incorporate it into their strategy, as the impact of technology on a company's reputation and public image is 'instantaneous and far-reaching' (Owyang & Toll, as cited by Kent & Taylor, 2010, p. 209).

2.4.2. Incorporation of Social Media

The various stages leading up to a PR crisis, and the ways in which organisations try to handle such crises, is greatly influenced by the emergence of social media. Social media is increasingly being used for organisational and corporate communication as well as public relations due to its perceived benefits. According to McCorkindale, around 69% of the Fortune 500 companies are now present on social media platforms. There have also been studies showing that out of 328 organisations that were studied, 65% of them planned on increasing their presence on these platforms (McCorkindale, as cited by Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). According to Macnamara and Zerfass (2012), using social media within a company opens many new doors, enabling more interaction, also on a two-way level. These platforms make it easier for companies to keep in contact with their customer base and stakeholders as well as to stay up to date with current trends. As pointed out by Phillips and Young (2009), the internet has enabled communication based on one-to-many. Communication is usually understood as one-to-one, involving two people but these social media platforms have especially made it possible to communicate on a much greater scale.

It has also, however, been pointed out that there remain many gaps in the knowledge organisations and companies have on how to make use of social media, in a beneficial manner. Public relations is still in the early stages of using these platforms so there remain blurred lines between what their strategies should be versus what they currently are. To date, there aren't any clear set rules on how to use social media; the practices are still very unregulated and unmanaged (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Valentini, 2015). A study conducted by Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) found that out of the organisations studied, only 23% have a strategy or policy in place for social media practices, outlining the objective for the usage, who can speak, for what reasons, and under what circumstances (Moreno, Navarro, Tench & Zerfass, 2015). Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) also conducted in-depth interviews with some social media experts, with a vast majority of them stating that they believed organisations in the private sector should develop a social media strategy, including elements such as who is allowed to speak, what they can speak about as well as when and how. Some also argued that organisations should adopt a content analysis strategy in which they monitor social media platforms and assess what is being said about the organisation so they can pinpoint any negative or positive content (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Valentini, 2015).

There are also many risks involved with the usage of social media by organisations. Public relations professionals are very concerned with the potential harm that can be done due to the openness and lack of regulation that surrounds social media usage. Essentially, anyone is able to post or comment online which brings light to issues surrounding control. The openness and participation on these platforms show that organisations and members need to be careful with their practices and usage (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Moreno et al., 2015). As Phillips and Young pointed out, one major issue on social media is also that the context or meaning of a message can be misinterpreted, which can cause big problems for the public relations practitioner. The sense of a message can be changed according to who is reading it and so there needs to be a way in which one can manage when events such as these take place (Phillips & Young, 2009). The above-mentioned specialists recommend developing a strategy to prevent these things from happening. They advocate the development of a framework which outlines required guidelines and policies, which can be taught through training, assistance and monitoring of the content on social media (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). They mainly argued that, nowadays, there is a need for integration between the social media communications and the corporate and organisational communications (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

This is a core element which was addressed throughout the interviewing process so as to give context to the changing landscape of PR activities with the arrival of social media. Every PR practitioner had social media integrated in their role in one way or another and for this reason it is important to consider the literature on this topic.

2.4.3. Criticisms of Social Media usage in PR

Despite the general consensus that the rise of social media is an increasingly important factor when it comes to public relations, it is important to note that there is little concrete evidence pointing to the effectiveness of social media as a tool for managing public relations. As shown through a survey conducted by Sweetser, Porter, Chung, and Kim (2008), only people who read and write blogs actually consider these sources as legitimate and credible for gathering information (Kent & Taylor, 2010). This is an element which may however have changed over the years as social media became more widespread and used among the general public. In fact, Moreno et al. (2015) stated that many people rely on social media as a credible source of information and claim that it is "free from the organizational, marketing and economic imperatives faced by traditional journalism" (p. 246). This demonstrates that there may be mixed opinions on the subject of social media being a credible and unbiased source for news and information, in contrast with traditional journalism. It can also be said that many times social media is not used for the purpose of business. According to Kent and Taylor (2010), the usage of social media by teenagers is usually based on entertainment purposes, while only up to 8% of adults use social media for networking or for professional use. The main reason people use social media is said to be able to keep in contact with friends (Valentini, 2015). That being said, it is also important to consider the changes that have been taking place in the last decade, with social media becoming increasingly ingrained in business practices.

Michael Kent was one of the first scholars to criticise the usage and discussion about social media. He believed that many of the claims made about its importance have no basis to them and that their power, in reality, is probably very limited (Kent & Taylor, 2010; Valentini, 2015; Moreno et al., 2015). Kent and Taylor (2010) conducted a content analysis of articles from *Public Relations Tactics* to assess how much of the discussion criticizes or questions the technology. Two-thirds of the articles which they studied made mention of the power of social media in public relations. The statements made can be summarised into: (1) social media helps reach a larger audience, (2) have a two-way communication and (3) be able to engage with the public (Kent & Taylor, 2010). The overall idea presented in these articles is that many people and professionals, such as journalists, use social media and that, as a result, public relations practitioners should do the same (Kent & Taylor, 2010). In addition to this, 59% of the articles studied provided some sort of suggestions for using social media but very few of them had any evidence proving that these strategies worked (Kent & Taylor, 2010). Out of all the articles examined, only 35% of them questioned social media in any way. Most of them just considered it an inherently important tool without questioning its effectiveness (Kent & Taylor, 2010). This study shows that there are quite a few gaps in this field in outlining the importance of social media and concrete evidence of its effectiveness. This raises the question as to why there are so few criticisms about social media, considering all the risks associated with it (Kent & Taylor, 2010). It is one thing to recognise the importance of social media when it comes to public relations, but it is another thing to suggest that social media can be used as a practical tool for companies to manage their public relations. The research above suggests that the latter cannot necessarily be claimed.

The topic of social media is a very important element of this research and throughout the interviewing process, there seemed to be very differing opinions on the power and benefit of these platforms. For this reason, the criticisms on social media, or lack thereof, are important to analyse in order to be able to relate them to the perceptions of the PR practitioners. Furthermore, the aforementioned research on this topic is somewhat dated as much of it was conducted towards the beginning of the last decade. For this reason, the interviews will be able to draw attention to the gaps within the existing research and elaborate on the practices and usage of social media in a more contemporary manner.

2.5. Social Media and Crisis Communication

2.5.1. The need for Social Media in Crisis Communication

According to the Pew Research Center (2019), over the years, there has been a major increase in the percentage of U.S. adults who use at least one social media site. In 2010, around 43% of adults in the U.S. used some sort of social media site and in 2019, this number increased to 72%. These platforms are low cost, or even free, places where one can express ideas and opinions. This creates a new way to communicate and reach a far larger audience in times of crisis communication (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). With these sites being available, one can see that there are much less journalists getting involved as a crisis can be shared and spread around over and over through word of mouth. A study was conducted in which communication professionals were surveyed about their opinions on social media and blogs and it came out that 92% of them believed these are the main actors in mainstream news coverage nowadays. Despite this, out of those surveyed only 13% stated they incorporated social media into their companies' crisis communication strategies (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). It is very important to develop a strategy for how a company will communicate during a crisis through social media as many public relations practitioners already make use of it for communication (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011; Bundy, Pfarrer, Short & Coombs, 2017). Veil et al. (2011) point out that sites such as Facebook and Twitter are good platforms to use in order to monitor public reactions as they provide information of a broad range of users. In this way, companies can easily keep track of what is being said about them or discussions surrounding them. In 2010, only around 8% of Americans had a Twitter account but out of those who did, 51% followed organisations and companies on the site. There are constantly discussions taking place about companies, many times 'without our knowledge and perhaps worse, without our participation' (Solis, as cited by Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011, p. 113). Companies can attempt to keep up with these discussions by creating reports tracking public opinion as stated through these platforms (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011; Bundy et al., 2017).

According to Veil et al. (2011), in the same way public relations is about creating and maintaining relations, so too is social media. The issue of uncertainty can unsettle key stakeholders in the company and many times this can be prevented by using social media, by sharing information directly and quickly (Bundy et al., 2017). One of the main reasons companies may use social media, is to maintain a certain reputation. The way in which these platforms are created makes it easy for companies to respond and react to rumours which may involve them, ensuring an overall positive public image (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011; Bundy et al., 2017). As mentioned previously, one important factor for companies dealing with an emerging PR crisis is to take control of the conversation. Social media allows companies to do this in an effective way.

Throughout the last few years, the Internet became the main tool used for communication, whether it be with the public, stakeholders, investors or other. This has caused a shift in the practice of public relations and communications professionals (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). There has been an increasing amount of studies conducted on how the internet should be used as a communication tool, especially from a theoretical standpoint (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Maresh-Fuehrer & Smith, 2016). There has also been a focus set on the use of the internet as a tool for crisis communication. Very little research, however, has been conducted on integrating all these elements to develop a strategy for companies to use this to assess risk and issues management, to develop a plan in times of crises and to have a strategy to respond to crises if they do occur (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Maresh-Fuehrer & Smith, 2016). In this, the way in which companies communicate also comes into play, with the need to have some guidelines on online communication (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008).

Before the rise of the Internet, communication was based mainly on a one-to-many approach, making use of traditional media such as TV, radio, newspapers and such. In this way, the information was exerted onto the public, but they had little chance to respond to it. In today's world, however, with the rise of user-generated content, this has changed drastically, and the public increasingly expects transparency in their conversation with companies (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Maresh-Fuehrer & Smith, 2016). Whereas before it was based on whether journalists accredited value to the message, now it is more up to the public to develop an opinion about a company (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008).

That being said, the Internet can also be a source of risk in these practices. It is due to the internet that a broad range of new crises exist such as cyber-attacks, the rapid spreading of rumours, hacking and more. For this reason, it is important to consider that the Internet may be of help but it may also be the source of the problem (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Maresh-Fuehrer & Smith, 2016). Very similar to what was discussed in the previous sections, some strategies have been developed for crisis and issues management. These however also consider the role of social media. There are four stages that are outlined to describe crisis management and they fall into the phases of: *issues management*, *planning prevention*, the *crisis* and the *post-crisis* (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p. 147; Maresh-Fuehrer & Smith, 2016, p. 626). An important element of issues management is to assess the potential of a crisis emerging and the Internet now plays an important role in this as it monitors much of the communications that take place (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Eriksson & Olsson, 2016). Nowadays, crises increasingly occur online as the public makes use of social media to take a stance against companies. This new landscape enables the public to shift from a 'passive' role to a more 'active' role (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Eriksson & Olsson, 2016). This means that there is more risk of displeasing the public and causing discussions over the company. This outlines the importance of early action and transparency to avoid an issue to spiral into a crisis. Keeping track of discussions may be the solution to be able to develop an appropriate response plan (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Maresh-Fuehrer & Smith, 2016; Eriksson & Olsson, 2016).

The issues of social media and crisis communications strategies were a major part of the questions posed to respondents in this research. The participants shared information on their strategies and how they make use of social media for their benefit. For this reason, it is noteworthy to see what the academic literature can contribute to this topic.

2.5.2. Phases and Strategies for Crisis Communication with Social media

Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith (2008) outlined in their work the importance of having a strategy in place when dealing with a crisis, especially in relation to social media usage. They gave a guide to some concrete actions that need to take place when dealing with crisis communication. This differs to the outline that was given previously as it more directly includes the importance of incorporating social media into these strategies. They described these strategies by first looking into the initial phase of issues management, they then gave steps to be taken in the prevention phase of a crisis, followed by steps that need to be taken in a crisis stage and finally, outlining some final steps once the crisis is over. For the sake of this research, the focus will be put on the first outline, being that of the initial phase of issues management, whilst also incorporating some elements of the other phases. This phase was chosen as a focus because it provides an outline that can be used to study similarities or differences when the interviews take place, learning about the experience of PR practitioners, who may not be willing to share concrete strategies for when a crisis has already occurred. The issues management outline also relates more to the previous sections and provides additional information by incorporating social media while also being very similar to the other phases outlined by Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith (2008).

The issues management phase is a crucial moment in dealing with an issue or crisis. This phase outlines the actions that need to be taken before as well as during a crisis. The following section will outline the different stages of issues management, as also represented in *Figure 3*. It is important to, first off, (1) have enough resources available to deal with these issues, this may include a crisis manual, online resources or certain experts which might be needed throughout the crisis. (2) There needs to be an online monitoring system in place to assess the discussions, which may also include the use of search engine optimization to ensure the company website it first to show up online. (3) A trained team is needed. (4) It is important to have the important influencers under view as well as allies which may be of help throughout dealing with the crisis. (5) Needs and actions need to be prioritised based on the potential and risk of a crisis. (6) A platform solely dedicated to providing information about the company should be developed, this can include links to certain sources which discuss the crisis at hand for the customers and employees to be able to follow. (7) The strategy has to be global as information on the internet quickly goes from local to global, meaning the links need to be public to enable people to gather information. This can also include the use of both traditional as well as online media. (8) Finally, guidelines should be developed on how to communicate online (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Maresh-Fuehrer & Smith, 2016).

This section will help draw differences between the practices of PR professionals, as seen through the interview research and what has been discussed in the literature as the appropriate steps to take in crisis management.

	Scholar	**Steps and Stages**											
Dealing with an issue	*Fearn-Banks*		detection				prevention & preparation		containment			recovery	learning
	Chase / Jones (Dougall)		monitoring			identification	prioritization	analysis	strategy decision	implementation			evaluation
Crisis Communication (incl. Social media)	*Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith (issue management)*	sufficient resources	online monitoring	trained team	influencers and allies		prioritization		information platforms	global reach	comm-unication guidelines		

Figure 3 - Dealing with an issue and Crisis communication including social media

The previous paragraphs have outlined the many different models and strategies which have been developed in the literature on this topic. There are many different ways in which scholars regard dealing with an issue but one can also note that they follow a basic trend. It is important to point out and understand these different models and steps in order to properly assess which of these are still relevant with the increasingly important role of social media practices. This will help draw more concrete conclusions and comparisons between what is said in academic literature and how PR professionals perceive these things, as will be studied through the interview research.

3. Research design and Argumentation

3.1. Methods

The aim of this research is to see how public relations processes have changed since the arrival of new technologies as well as new ways of communicating and how public relations professionals handle drawbacks for their companies' public image over social media accounts. For this reason, I chose a qualitative research-based methodology which allows for a more in-depth take on the topic. The specific method used was a series of interviews done in a semi-structured manner to allow for a much more wide-ranging discussion (Babbie, 2015). The interviews focused on questioning professionals on the nature and practices of their work, transitions since the rise of social media, as well as issues and strategies relating to PR disasters. Given the people's roles, as listed below, and importance, the interviews mainly targeted professionals who work in the public relations sector. There are many different ways in which I came in contact with these relevant people, but I mainly made contact with them via email or through LinkedIn. I also have a personal contact who works in this industry, which enabled me to reach more relevant and high-profile connections. In this context the sampling method would thus be considered snowball sampling as I relied on the connections of the contacts that I have already established (Cronin, 2008; Babbie, 2015).

Half of the interviews that were conducted were done in person, mainly in the offices of the interviewees. However, due to the fact that many of the participants were high-profile professionals, and due to time constraints on their part, a number of the interviews also had to be conducted via call, such as through Skype or Google Hangouts. There were no obvious discrepancies in the answers provided in person as opposed to online and thus it should not cause issues with the responses. The sample was focused on people who work in the public relations industry, both currently and even possibly in the past few years – and one in the late 90s --, in order to draw differences in the work practices. For this research, and as outlined by the *Methodological Guidelines*, the adequate amount of data to be collected was meant to be between 10 and 15 interviews, each of which would have a duration of around 45 minutes. In the end of the data collection, 10 interviews were conducted with an average duration of close to 45 minutes. Some of the interviews were slightly shorter due to the fact that the professionals had some time constraints and thus could not spend more time on the interview.

Considering the nature of this research is deductive and largely based on people's experiences, interviewing seemed to be the most appropriate methodology in line with the theoretical framework of this paper (Babbie, 2015). As for the analysis of the data, I made use of grounded theory coding processes by coding the transcripts through open, axial and selective codes (Charmaz, 2014). This coding was conducted manually without the use of any software due to time constraints and lack of knowledge about the relevant software initially. This form of coding was chosen for this research due to its flexibility as well as accessibility and as a form of analysis, it can be used for a large range of research questions. It also proved to be efficient in that it contributed to developing new insights to the phenomenon and adding to previous concepts and theory (Charmaz, 2014; Babbie, 2015).

3.1.1. Sampling

The sample consists of ten people, all working within the field of PR and communications in one way or another. Some of the participants were solely PR managers or consultants whilst others were managing a PR team under their role in, mainly, marketing. A majority of the participants work within the tech scene, largely based in Amsterdam. A number of the interviewees currently work in smaller companies, many of which are B2B but had also had experience working in other companies which are B2C focused. All the participants had experience working in PR, being one of the main roles they have in the company. Following, a table will outline the different participants providing their names and occupations as well as their position in the company. For the sake of anonymity and sparing sensitive information, the participants were given pseudonyms.

Name	Occupation
John	Chief growth officer in software company, managing own PR team
Richard	Head of marketing in tech company, responsible for PR
Mark	PR manager in tech company
James	PR manager for pharmaceutical company; PR consultant
Mary	PR manager in tech company
Peter	Head of growth in tech company, managing own PR team
Jason	Global chief marketing officer at one of the world's largest breweries
Kevin	PR consultant; organizer of PR events in Amsterdam (for professionals)
George	PR manager and content writer in tech company
Samuel	PR consultant

3.1.2. In-Depth Interviews

As stated previously, the chosen method for data collection for this research was semi-structured interviews with a guide that lead me through my topics and themes, enabling me to have more flexibility and touch upon topics I may not have considered prior to the interview which are of interest (Cronin, 2008). This method seemed to be the most adequate for the research as it enabled me to gather information and have a more in-depth understanding about the perspectives and practices of PR professionals. This allowed me to give enough space to the participants to share their opinions and perspectives of the changing practices within PR without letting my own opinions or the theory studied influence the answers I was given.

Throughout the interviewing process one could note that it followed a form of dialogue between myself and the PR professional. I ensured that the conversation was being guided in the right direction whilst also making sure I was not interfering too much and not affecting their responses, also mainly by asking open ended questions up to their interpretation (Cronin, 2008). I also adopted the use of probes in order to have more depth in the responses that were provided by the interviewees. Alongside this, follow-up questions were also asked in order to fully delve into the practices these PR professionals adopt and the changes one can note over the course of the last decade. This also ensured that the conversation did not go off track and only relevant concepts were being discussed throughout the interview.

The themes of the interviews were organized in such a manner that the conversation was able to follow a general flow without going off track and discussing concepts that might not be relevant to the research. Most of the themes had concepts in common and so jumping from one theme to another and back did not cause obvious confusion or discrepancies in the answers. At the end of the interviews, all participants had the option to add any additional information that they deemed relevant and Important which ensured that everything they want to portray was being mentioned, even if not outlined as such within the guide.

The following section will provide an overview of the interview guide. The full version of the guide will be available in the *Appendix* of this paper. Throughout the interviews there were five overarching themes that were discussed, and these were outlined by three or four broad, open questions, followed by some probes and, if needed, follow-up questions. At the beginning of every interview, I asked the participants to present themselves and their positions in their companies. Following this, I asked how they would describe PR as a professional field. The following paragraphs will outline the themes from the interview guide as well as the types of questions that were asked in relation to it.

The first theme of the interview guide that was discussed, was that of “Daily practices and usage of social media platforms”, including question asking about daily practices, the role of social media in these and general responsibilities.

The second theme examined “Changes in PR practices with the introduction of social media” which involved questions about their work in PR before social media (if applicable), the changes in PR practices since the rise of social media and their consideration of social media in decision-making.

The third theme entailed “Transition and reaction times in using social media” in which questions revolving around keeping up to date and targeting and catering to specific audiences were asked.

The fourth, “Maintaining a positive public image in media” had questions about reputation management and the daily activities in order to keep up their reputation and push forward a certain image. These also involved questions about their content creation and how they curate it in order to keep up a positive public image.

And finally, the last, and most elaborate, theme was about “Risk and Issues Management” in which the interviewees were questioned on their (potential) strategies in risk or crisis communication and mitigation, and their perceptions on what qualifies as a crisis and the steps taken to assess and address these.

3.2. Data Collection

The time period in which the data was collected lasted around one month and a half, having conducted all the interviews by mid-May. There was a slight delay in the data collection period due to the fact that the sample was difficult to reach and time constraints were a major issue for the interviewees. Some of the participants had to cancel or reschedule a meeting and others stated they did not have time to do it over the phone and that only email was an option for them. For this reason, new participants who were available to meet or call had to be found, as completing interviews over email do not follow the guidelines of how in-depth interviews should be conducted.

The interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees, them having been presented with a consent form that they could sign. They were also made aware of their rights in terms of sharing information, allowing them to withdraw from the research at any point or choose certain bits of information to stay confidential. The interviews were recorded using both a smartphone and a laptop, to ensure that no information would be lost and back-ups were available. Throughout the interviewing process, I was also taking notes of the interesting concepts that were outlined, many of which are present in the theory or were mentioned multiple times throughout.

Following the data collection phase of the research, the interviews were transcribed, making use of transcriptions softwares such as Descript and Temi.com which helped speed the process up. After the software helped transcribe the interviews, I went over the recordings again, correcting any mistakes to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts. Finally, the data was then coded and analysed by using the grounded theory approach. These codes were conducted manually, without the use of a software by mainly separating the codes into tables with their respective quotes and then colour coding them to group together the relevant concepts. The following section will go more in depth about the coding and analysis process of these interviews.

3.3. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data collected from the interviews was analysed using the grounded theory approach which includes open coding the transcripts, followed by narrowing down the open codes into axial codes and finally, narrowing these down into around four predominant themes which are the selective codes. According to Strauss and Corbin (2007) “A researcher can think of coding as “mining” the data, digging beneath the surface to discover the hidden treasures contained within data” (p. 221). This shows the importance of going through the data multiple times and attempting to extract relevant themes accordingly. The analysis was done with constant comparison in order to ensure that the data extracted did indeed have similarities between the concepts discussed and also assessing this data independently from what was discussed within the theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). After a certain amount of coding and recoding, the data reached a level of saturation in which no new themes came into play and the current ones were being repeated (Charmaz, 2014). Throughout the coding process, knowledge on what was mentioned in the theoretical framework was kept in mind in order to distinguish the relevant themes, whilst also ensuring it does not influence the coding process and create bias. The following sections will outline in depth the coding process and research development by discussing the open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

3.3.1. Open coding

After having finished transcribing the ten interviews, I printed out all the transcripts and started manually coding them on paper. The first step in coding the data was to do a line-by-line coding, meaning each line in the transcript was given a relevant code (Charmaz, 2014). That being said, not every single line in the transcript was relevant to code and thus some were excluded. This line-by-line coding techniques makes it easier to analyse data that is more empirical. This form of coding encouraged me to find details in everyday life that would otherwise go undetected (Charmaz, 2014). Considering this research is based on the perspectives and practices of PR professionals, this form of coding seems to be the most accurate and concrete.

After this line-by-line manual coding technique was used and completed for all the ten transcripts, they were then put into tables on a Word document and the respective quotes were organized next to the codes. In total, around 765 codes were extracted in total from all the transcripts. It must be noted however, that many of the codes were repetitions. This is one of the setbacks of not using a software as the same code can be repeated with other wording, thus showing up as separate codes. It can thus be assumed that an average of 25-30% of the 765 codes were repetitions. After having gathered these codes, they were grouped together according to the saturation of the themes, including repetition or even based on my perception of them belonging in the same general theme. After grouping all the relevant codes together into a broader open code that encompassed the theme, there were 166 open codes left. These were also grouped within a table with all transcripts being merged together and having their respective quotes in place. These were then colour-coded in order to see which quotes and codes belonged to which transcripts. I was then left with a coding scheme, so to say, which enabled me to see which were the overarching themes throughout the transcripts. Following this open coding process, the next step to gather concrete information on the data was to do an axial code based off the open codes that had been extracted.

3.3.2. Axial coding

The next step in the coding process was to create an axial code based off the open codes that were created from the transcripts. Corbin and Strauss (2007) describe axial coding as “Crosscutting or relating concepts to each other” (p. 548), which meant grouping the similar or relevant open codes together which would then create an axial code. The way in which the codes were grouped together in the open coding process, made it much easier to extract common themes in order to create an axial code. Having to deal with a much smaller number of open codes facilitated the process of grouping these into common themes. The axial coding process also helped to see which open codes were more relevant and recurring to the research and which were not. As a result, after having grouped the 166 open codes together, 13 axial codes were able to be created based off common themes and concepts. Following this process of axial coding comes a last step to the grounded theory coding process, which is that of selective coding.

3.3.3. Selective coding

The process of selective coding defines the final step of the data analysis part of the research. Selective coding consists of taking the axial codes and narrowing them down even further to broader overarching themes that encompass the discussions and major concepts from the interviews. From the 13 axial codes that were gathered, I was able to categorise them into four main selective codes, which define the major themes that were discussed throughout the interviews. The four selective codes were namely “Access to network and information”, “Nurturing the public image”, “Social reach and strategy” and finally, “General attitudes towards PR”. The following section of this thesis will then delve into each of the selective codes and will describe, analyse and discuss the axial codes within, making use of the open codes they consist of. It will also relate these findings from the interviews to the theory and literature that was discussed previously so as to determine and similarities, discrepancies and gaps between the readings and the findings from the interviews.

4. Results and Discussion

This study aims to explore how PR practitioners perceive and respond to the changes in the public relations field, considering the emergence and spread of social media and digital practices. The impact of social media cannot be understated as it has become prominent in marketing and communications sectors over the last two decades. For this reason, it is important to consider the changes that have been taking place over the past two decades in order to understand how these practices are put to use in this digital era. These findings will highlight the discrepancies between what is discussed in the literature as PR strategies and which practices are actually being put to use by professionals in the field

As mentioned previously, ten people in total were interviewed in a semi-structured manner. Furthermore, an interview guide was used in order to accurately gather data on their perceptions on public relations. Doing so allowed me to gauge PR professionals' perception to currently changing PR practices and their applications in the era of social media in contrast to previously discussed theory and literature on the topic. These interviews emphasized the newfound practices in the field of PR today. Following the interviews, the data was gathered, transcribed and coded to a level of saturation whereby no new information was coming into play and the main themes of the data were being repeated amongst the participants. As a result, the analysis contained consistent themes throughout, allowing for unique and interesting research and making use of the interview data as well as the theory studied.

Following the coding and analysis, four prevalent themes were extracted from the data to answer the research question. These central themes emerged through the process of selective coding and will be thoroughly explained throughout the next sections of this paper.

The first theme revolved around the access the participants had to network and information. This concerns their need to stay updated with current trends as well as relating and networking with strong contacts in the relevant fields they work in. Secondly, the participants delved into the importance of maintaining and creating a positive public image amongst their audience, be it customers or other companies in their field. This evidently relates to the importance of reputation management in PR practices. Thirdly, an important and recurring theme throughout the interviews was that of social reach and strategy. Specifically, the need to access a broad audience for their product or image as well as strategies employed when putting these practices to use. Lastly, the final theme focused on general attitudes the participants had toward public relations and their practices. This discussed the role that social media plays in PR as well as their perceptions of PR practices.

The findings within this research highlight discrepancies between theorized and discussed PR practices in relevant literature and the practices that are actually being put to use by companies in the digital age. Every interviewee involved in the study worked in PR or was managing a team for PR, largely in the tech industry, but also some with experience in more traditional industries. Thus, they were a relevant and credible sample due to their professional position and their familiarity with the new practices of today. The interviewees tended to regard PR in B2B and B2C companies under the same scope and this will thus be done in the same way throughout this research. The following sections will outline to dominant themes throughout the interviews whilst showcasing the PR practices these professionals employ as well as their perspectives on the field.

4.1. Access to network and information

As mentioned throughout the theory, a critical element of PR practices is staying up to date with trends as well as relationship-management with partners or other relevant contacts in the same field (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). The interviews clearly express elements of this theme and were thus grouped under the selective code "access to network and information". This selective code was extracted based on multiple axial codes which were made from the initial open coding. The following sections will describe the axial codes that comprise this selective code.

4.1.1. High Impact contacts

The first axial code extracted from the selective code is that of having "high impact contacts". This theme encompasses all the mentions the interviewees made regarding having high quality contacts and maintaining strong relationships with these contacts. Out of all ten interviewees, eight pointed out the importance of having strong contacts and relations. This is apparent from the interview conducted with John, a chief growth officer who manages a PR team for his company. He states on multiple occasions that strong contacts and networks are a very important element to a successful PR strategy, saying that he is “building a strong network of PR contacts”. He also claims:

> “One of the things that's really important is building a very strong network because if you want to cater to people who read certain magazines or engage with certain outlets, you need to have the right contacts in the right place and you need to build strong relationships with these contacts”.

This element of having strong contacts and relations also comes into play when a company might need help from these contacts, or to do certain favours by “getting people that are experts on this niche to validate you as a source of content for them” as stated by Richard, a marketing expert also managing his own PR team. Richard states that “for a small business being associated with people that are credible through PR [...] is our way to kind of skip the queue there and try to get to that quicker”, meaning that having high impact contacts may enable you to reach heights you may not achieve without them. A final example demonstrating the importance of contacts and relations is that with Kevin, the founder of a PR agency that organizes events throughout Amsterdam for professionals, stating that “it's all about being seen in the right place, with the right people, and the right outlets”. This shows that according to these PR practitioners, an important element of the profession is having access and being helped by high impact professionals or contacts who could help validate you as a good source or as having a good product as well as get you in contact with other professionals who might help grow your business (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). However, one issue that arises is that they broadly discuss the importance of having such impactful contacts, but they do not specify how it is possible to get in touch with such people. Especially in the start-up world, it might not be as straightforward to find people who might be very relevant in the field willing to help freely. Moreover, another element to consider is the question of what qualifies as an important contact in this field, with no indication given by the interviewees on this factor.

4.1.2. High quality sources

Much in line with the previous point, many of the interviewees also emphasized the importance of having relations with or being mentioned by high quality sources. Peter, a growth hacker managing a PR team, for one, emphasizes strongly that he believes quality sources are far more important than the quantity of sources you are mentioned in. He states that they “like to focus more on having a couple of really good articles every year so not every month or not every week but a couple of really good articles every year" because this would have a much stronger impact than to be mentioned by many different outlets which are not as impactful or trusted by the public. Peter says that "we always do research on the link that we are linking to, to make sure we're not linking to a rubbish website".

Yet again, from the ten participants who were interviewed, six made some remark toward focusing on being mentioned in only quality and trusted sources. Richard, for instance believes that:

> "if a respected journalist or respected publication in general, that people follow, talks about your business and people know that this is not the kind of publication that you can just buy your way in because they'd been around for four years and they followed them their entire lives or whatever that is. That's very, very valuable".

Therefore, this concept of quality sources can be related to that of high impact contacts as they both discuss the importance of connections made, whether it be people or sources. These connections could be to relevant people in the field or even journals, newspapers or websites that could mention you and potentially provide a further and more impactful reach. James, a PR and social media manager, even states that "PR is probably more towards the recommendation from some sort of trusted source". This, once again, puts into question how to attain such contacts in order to ensure you are present in high-profile sources. Peter states that one way of acquiring these contacts is to also promote them, creating more of a give and take relationship. However, if the sources they are trying to be mentioned in are very high profile, it doesn't seem much of a benefit to them to maintain this relationship which may be more one-sided.

Young (2012) outlines that the reputation of the company is very much reflected on the values they live internally, an element which is within the next theme of the analysis. He also notes, however, that a large part of the reputation of the company is also related to the connection and relations the company has. He points out that that having a positive media coverage has a large impact on the sales boosts the company may have. He especially notes how being in touch with high profile people and having them speak positively about the company is a very beneficial element to the reputation of the company. He also explains that this is equally impactful when it comes to negative media coverage as it could potentially have a disastrous effect on the reputation of the company. This explains what the interviewees outlined in the previous two sections, in which they advocate for strong and positive relations with people as well as sources and journalists.

4.1.3. Market and trend awareness

Another important element of PR and its practitioners, as also outlined by Moreno et al., is that of staying up to date with current trends and shifting public opinions. Both of the previous axial codes hinted at the importance of quality contacts, be it professionals or sources. These relate to the reach that a company might have through these contacts which can provide help and increased awareness. Throughout the interviews, some questions were asked concerning the importance of staying up to date as well as the means through which these professionals ensure they stay updated concretely. As this question was asked directly, every participant commented to some degree towards it. However, nine out of ten interviewees did state that they read in order to ensure they stay up to date. Mark, the PR manager of a company, states that he is "subscribed to a lot of newsletters", similarly to John. Finally, Richard also asserts that "either newsletters or blog feeds are the way -- and books obviously, but books are more like long content [...] -- [they] are a way for me to stay in the loop". This demonstrates that many of the interviewees turn to particular types of content in order to gather information regarding new trends. Three of the participants also point out that they do not believe social media to be a good source for updates because

> "it's becoming smaller, it's becoming more personal, it's probably more direct. And as a result, I think other channels, could be more efficient for getting updates on what's happening in the world" (John, Richard).

This contradicts what was discussed in the literature to some degree, because Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) point out that using social media should actually help in staying up to date with current trends due to the amount of directly available content. This showcases how some elements discussed in the literature do not fully align with the actual practices of PR practitioners.

Another major way for staying updated, as mentioned by seven of the ten participants, is that of networking with relevant professionals and people. Mark states that "I interact with other PR professionals and see how they do it and maybe what you can learn from each other as well". Mary, the PR manager of a company, also turns to others for her information as she "is drinking a lot of coffees with other PR people, just keeping each other in the loop". Samuel, a PR consultant, also works with others saying "I try to go to as many conferences as I possibly can. I try to talk to people, you know people within the industry, experts and get their opinion".

This very much alludes to the idea that learning the relevant trends in PR and otherwise is quite dependent on the relations one has with others in the same field. This relates to the previous two sub-themes as it stresses the importance of maintaining and creating good connections to relevant people, or sources.

Within all this trend awareness, Kevin points out that one of the many issues with staying updated, especially through social media, is that there seems to be a lot of ambivalence on what are the current trends and what aren't. He states that "a lot of people [are] trying to say that things are Trends, when really they are not, or exaggerating stuff" which is the reason why it seems beneficial to be related to other people in the field and, as Richard points out, "follow the three main thinkers that I actually think deliver value". This, once again, displays the importance of having connections in the field in order to grow your knowledge and work accordingly. This is an element which was also outlined by Veil, Buehner and Palenchar (2011). They claim that, increasingly, the public is taking charge on social media platforms and are the main generators of mainstream news coverage nowadays as opposed to journalists. This demonstrates that much of the information being spread is quite personal and subjective, which can be an issue when trying to stay updated with trends. This is, however, contradictory to what Moreno et al. (2015) said on the topic; that many people believe social media to be a reliable and credible source and that it is in fact traditional journalism which has certain marketing and economic imperatives which may cause the information to be more bias. This demonstrates that there are quite differing opinions among scholars, and even PR practitioners, on the element of whether social media is a reliable source of information or not.

4.2. Nurturing the Public Image

Another prominent element in PR, as discussed by Veil, Buehner and Palenchar (2011) as well as Bundy et al. (2017), is that of maintaining a certain public image as well as reputation management. Many scholars, along with the interviewees of the research, argue that PR essentially revolves around maintaining a certain image in the public and ensuring it is not negatively affected to the point of harming the company (Regester & Larkin, 2008). This theme was evident throughout the data from the interviews with many references being made to it in relation to the values of a company, the need for transparency, reputation management along with strategies for risk and crisis management. All these elements seem to contribute in some degree the public image of the company and for this reason it was put under the theme of "nurturing the public image". The following sections will outline the sub themes related to this one.

4.2.1. Reputation management

Within PR theory, the element of reputation is prevalent throughout literature on the topic. Reputation comprises a substantial part of what PR practices entail, it being centered on the idea of having a favourable public image (Regester & Larkin, 2008). Reputation management focused more on strategies adopted by a company in order to push a certain image by explicitly stating values and enforcing them throughout their content. For this reason, throughout the interviews the element of publicizing the company's vision and values is quite prominent. Four of the interviewees discussed these strategies, with for instance Kevin putting "strong focus on the conversion of the webpage and how to communicate what they are, who they are". John also does this by making sure "that we have a strong PR identity, that our brand vision and our brand identity is communicated appropriately through all communication channels". This shows that maintaining a positive or particular image in the public is a constant effort to display the values of the company on their channels in a consistent manner. On this matter, Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) point out that there are only very few companies which have actually adopted a clear strategy for social media, something they outline as a very important factor contributing to the public image of the company.

Accordingly, five of the interviewees stated that they explicitly have certain strategies they adopt in order to push this image. Kevin points out that for him "it's important when you have a branding strategy or want to be perceived as a brand that's doing X thing to make sure that there is consistency across the communications". In addition to this, he does "a bit of employer branding so we show the place as a cool place to work. We also try to portray ourselves as that brand that is educating the audience". This highlights the importance of using the communication channels in a strategic and consistent way to display a certain image. This was also discussed by Veil, Buehner and Palenchar (2011) as well as Bundy et al. (2017) in which they assert that a majority of companies make use of social media and communicate a certain way in order to maintain their reputation. The theme of employer branding was also discussed by Mark as he uses "Facebook and Instagram […] but that's mainly for employer branding" in order to keep a positive image among the public as well as other companies in the same field.

Much in line with the previous point, Peter explains that there is a relatively clear communication strategy that comes into play with reputation management. They ensure that their communicate stays in line with the vision that they try to put forward. Therefore, they "try to control having the exact words out there that we want, that we mean, we want to control that as long as possible". He states that this would avoid any confusion about what the company is about and will also "help us prevent any crisis from happening".

A final element which was discussed on the topic of reputation management was by Jason, the head of marketing and PR in a major beer brewery, who pointed out that reputation is a constructed concept and thus cannot be worked with in the way it is described in today's literature. He points out that:

> "[when] you study the determinants of reputation then nowhere can you find information that will inform you about what is the explanatory value of each of those determinants of reputation".

What is meant by this is that there aren't concrete variables or factors which directly contribute to maintaining or improving the reputation of a given company. He also believes that "some of those determinants have no practical significance whatsoever in explaining what the reputation of the company is". Therefore, reputation management should be dealt with under the scope of the image of a company rather than a specific reputation it is attempting to uphold. When studying literature on the topic of reputation management, however, one can note that many scholars do believe that there are certain variables which contribute to reputation. Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, and Sever (as cited by Boyd, Bergh & Ketchen, 2010) for instance claim that reputation is based off perceived quality and market prominence. Boyd, Bergh and Ketchen (2010) state that the value of reputation is determined by interactions and interrelations and note how all these determinants make sense together but not as much so independently. For this reason, one could argue that Jason was making an interesting point as he was attempting to outline the difficulty when it comes to the determinants of reputation, as individually they may not have much explanatory value.

4.2.2. Adherence to values

Another sub theme under the public image theme is that of adherence to values. This works very much in line with the previous point on reputation management. However, this concept is more related to pushing the values within the companies and adhering to them rather than strategically working to portray a certain image in the media. This is centered on the fact that there are certain values core to the company and by *living those values internally* they will be *represented externally* as well, thus adding to the public image of the company (Eriksson & Olsson, 2016). Kevin points out that “reputation is basically *generating trust*. When people trust you that you are good and have a purpose and then showing that you are accomplishing the purpose”. Another element of emphasizing these values is assessing the *value it has in society* and what the product might be contributing to others’ lives. George, a PR manager and content writer, explains that after a certain point, “you're not just looking at how many likes do I have how many shares do I have but then you're really starting to look at *how much impact do I have*”. The impact the company is making on people would then reflect well on the company and the values they portray, and thus live by. Kevin similarly outlines this when he emphasizes “what’s the impact that it’s making?”.

The final element which was outlined in relation to adherence to values was the *need to believe* in the product or service that is being produced in order to ensure its success. Samuel points out that there is “no point in doing PR unless you're *passionate* about it. Because if you're not passionate about it, then the people who are reading those stories, aren’t going to be passionate about it either”. This shows that the values and vision of the company would be *reflected* in their product thus determining the success of said product and the public image related to it (Eriksson & Olsson, 2016). However, it must also be considered that it is not always possible to be working for a company that has very positive products in place. In the age of multinational corporations, there are several products being sold that may not have a fully ethical production standard in place. For this reason, on the one hand, some of the observations of the interviewees may be skewed due to the fact that they largely are working within the tech and startup scene, meaning they might not be as confronted by these issues. On the other hand it can also be stated that many of these tech companies are being heavily scrutinized and pressured to work in sustainable and appropriate ways.

4.2.3. Trust and transparency

The following sub theme under the topic of image management is that of the importance of trust and transparency within a company as well as towards the public. The relevance of transparency in a company's communications as well as its actions is something which was outlined and described by nine out of ten of the interviewees involved. Evidently, each respondent's reaction to the theme underlines the relevance of this subtheme. John states that "at the end of the day, the most important thing in PR is to be transparent" and that "transparency is the key to a strong public image". This shows how this sub theme relates to the concept of maintaining a positive public image as this may be reflected through the transparency of the company, something that would be well respected by the public. In fact, Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith (2008), as well as Maresh-Fuehrer & Smith (2016), show that the public increasingly has the expectation that companies remain transparent throughout their conversations. Mark also points out that he believes "it's important to be as transparent as you can be from the start". All the participants outlined this in different ways, be it through the communication of one's values or how one deals with certain issues. In the interview with George, he pointed out that "even if you're doing something bad if you do it in an absolutely transparent way, I think you can... I wouldn't say get away with it, but then there's logic behind it". The same concept was described by Richard as he says that if something goes wrong "and you really want to do some PR that can help you, be frank and just say it". According to the participants, being transparent is largely reflected on one's values and will end up providing a more positive image to a company, even in times of risk or crises. This was another element that was covered by a number of scholars within the theoretical framework as many pointed out that it is best to be transparent at all times, especially when dealing with crises and being honest about the steps that are being taken to address them (Regester & Larkin, 2008; Watson & Noble, 2014; Johnson, 2017).

Another element which relates to the need of being transparent argues that the risk of public access to hidden information is high in the rapid spread of information in the digital age. Seven of the interviewees warned that information can easily leak and affect the public image in an even more negative way than otherwise. As Samuel points out, "I don't think that's the way to do it because eventually you're going to get caught out" and that "these days you can get caught out very very easily". Even Richard points out the danger of this as "it just takes one little leak, one person to give it to the wrong person. So you cannot really hide it". Clearly, there is a big risk in hiding certain information, as Mark says, because “people will suspect that there is something, there is another truth that you're not telling. And that could in the end be worse than telling the truth right from the beginning”. The statement emphasizes the importance of being transparent all the way throughout because if that is not the case there are many more risks that can come one’s way than if the company had been honest from the start. This was also outlined by Regester and Larkin (2008) and Watson and Noble (2014), who said that there is always a running risk that hidden information would be discovered, and this would simply result in a negative impact on the public image of the company. With the rise of the internet communications and social media, the risk of information leaks has contributed to the perception that companies should prevent risks by being as transparent as possible. This is an example of how social networks can pressure companies into acting more ethically.

That being said, it was also outlined by two of the interviewees, that at times it is not possible to be fully transparent about what the company is doing. As Kevin points out, “as a brand for example, you cannot say, 'oh we let go all these people because we are not selling or because the growth of the company's not going as well as planned'” because this would also harm the company in terms of their stakeholders and the internal trust. The same is suggested by Mark who also did PR for a governmental organization in which “there are certain restrictions in what you can say and what you can't say”. However, this is limited to a few instances and is not related to hiding information but rather about weighing the unnecessary harm it might do to the company if one is overly transparent and vocal. Yet again, it must be pointed out that many of the interviewees worked for smaller companies and thus may not face many of the issues large corporations do, hindering them in being completely transparent (Valentini, 2015).

Furthermore, another element which relates the importance of transparency back to maintaining a positive public image is that being transparent can be very representative of the values a company puts forth. George, for one, states that “I know for example in our case our company is intrinsically good. So I know that [...] even if tough things happen, I can be transparent about it”. The idea behind this focuses on the company standing by their core values and if they do so, there should be no issue in being transparent. As Samuel explains it, “every company has to live its values. So if it's putting out certain values, it has to live it internally as well”. This can also be related to the previous point of the companies being smaller in scale and thus there not being much to hide in comparison to large corporations (Valentini, 2015). It should, however, also be noted that many times the communication may not be fully up to the PR practitioner as there may be guidelines given by higher ranking professionals on how to communicate. This can be related back to the limits of transparency because it may not be in the PR practitioner's power to decide what can be disclosed and what not.

As outlined by Henriques (2013) there are a multitude of factors that contribute to the limits of transparency. One of these are the economic impacts of it, as transparency does not often go cost-free. Another element Henriques (2013) claims to be a limit to the ability to be transparent is that of social ignorance. He explains that in many cases, society may function in a better and more organized way if not all things are transparent. He claims that oftentimes transparency can lead to unrest, even though this may apply more on a societal than a corporate level. Another very important element to the limits of transparency is that it could in many cases negatively affect the stakeholders. Many elements may lead to the fall of a company, harming their revenues or commercial prospects. Overall, Henriques (2013) states that in cases in which transparency is adequate, it is beneficial to do so but in cases in which it Is not, there is no requirement to be transparent.

4.2.4. Risk and Crisis Management

In line with the need for transparency, a major part of the discussion in the interviews was about how to handle issues related to risk and crisis management. This was categorized under the theme of public image on the basis that the efforts made by the company in relation to potential risk and crisis are all related to ensuring the public image isn't harmed and their reputation remains positive. The following section will outline the strategies which are adopted by these PR practitioners to address crisis situations.

Many of the interviewees stressed that a clear crisis strategy outline is a very corporate strategy to have in place and many times might not be applicable to smaller companies. Five of the participants said that as the company grows the need for such an outline becomes very important, but as long as the company is still limited, a strategy of this sort is not required. As Peter points out "we're still small. So we don't have a crisis communications strategy or plan out there.". The same goes for Richard where he states that with "a company our size those grounds are not fully covered". John points out that when the company reaches "20.000 employees, you cannot control and influence everything that happens in the company" "and that's when crises are more likely to occur". Therefore, according to these interviewees, it very much depends on the company's reach and size to determine whether there is a need for a specific strategy or not.

Five of the interviewees stated that in times of crises the strategy they would adopt would be in real time and dependent on the situation. As Peter explains it, “whenever something happens it's like all hands and drop everything you're doing and focus on the situation and so live action. It's going to be probably live action”. This shows that oftentimes the idea of having an elaborate strategy already in place is not as applicable for some companies as many times it is something that is dealt with when it occurs. This also relates to the fact that many of the strategies that would be adopted are context specific, as outlined by six of the respondents. Samuel states that “it really does depend on the situation”. As John outlines, there are many different crises which would need different strategies to address them. He explains that

> “a crisis could be that something that is true has made it into the public sphere and that reflects badly on your company. You're going to deal with that situation differently than when something which is untrue makes it into the public sphere and reflects badly upon your company”.

Due to the different elements which could cause crises and the complications related to it, most of these practitioners had very basic guidelines they may follow. However, most of it would be dealt with in the moment and based on the specific issue occurring.

The following sections will outline what preliminary and basic strategies are adopted in the beginning of a crisis situation. One of the more common strategies, adopted by four of the practitioners is that of *monitoring social media* and “being aware of any bad public chatter as soon as possible”, as John puts it. Mark states that “normally people are monitoring what's happening on social media and if there is an issue, we react on it”. They show that it’s important to first off see if this *issue has reached the public sphere* and only act on it once this appears to be the case. Monitoring social media discussion was also an element that frequently came up throughout the literature. In fact, Dougall (2008) and Fearn-Banks (2010) point out that this is one of the first stages of the detection phase in a crisis situation. They point out that the company first has to monitor the media and see what the public is saying about the issue. This also is part of the prevention and preparation stage in which one monitors the online discussions (Theaker, 2016; Ndlela, 2019; Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) also recommend adopting such a content analysis strategy in which the social platforms are being monitored and Veil, Buehner and Palenchar (2011) state that Facebook and Twitter are good platforms for doing so.

This also relates to the *need for response*, another factor that was outlined by three of the participants. John points out that it is first important to see “how big the reach is and then deciding on whether we need to act upon it or not" because there is the risk that "when something's only discussed by a few people, making a public statement will only bring more attention to it". That is one of the first elements of the strategy that is adopted: *assessing the reach the crisis has*. This is also explained by Fearn-Banks (2010) as one of the stages in prevention and preparation in which the company prioritises the issues and assesses their reach. Kevin also points out that:

> "it all depends on how many repercussions it has. If it's a big publication saying you're sh*t, then you're in trouble. If it's a small blog in the middle of nowhere, that nobody reads then not really".

This was also explained by Ndlela (2019), wherein she shows the importance of *assessing the impact of an issue* before acting upon it. She states that there are a few ways to assess issues in order to determine the risk they pose for the company. One of the ways is to assess the harm the issue would have on the public. Another element to take into consideration is the level of risk for the company's reputation as well as "regulatory and legal implications" (p. 43).

The subsequent element that is outlined is the importance of *early action*, something also described as an important factor by Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith (2008). As Mark puts it, "you're trying to solve the problem as soon as possible. It's really important to communicate very quickly in a crisis situation". John also states this saying that "the key is early action, so you want to be aware of it as soon as possible". This was also discussed in the theory by Maresh-Fuehrer and Smith (2016) as well as Eriksson and Olsson (2016) as they warn that if the issue is not dealt with in a timely manner, there is a running risk that it could potentially spiral into a crisis. For this reason, they recommend monitoring the discussions throughout in order to determine how serious and pressing the issue is becoming.

Another element which has to be considered is the fact that the issue should be *addressed at its sources*; as Richard points out the issue should be addressed "in the same publication where it was raised ideally. With hope that the same people that saw the bad stuff, will see the good stuff". This is also considered to be one of the first steps in the Chase/Jones Issues Management model (Dougall, 2008).

A further important factor, as outlined in the previous section, is that of *remaining transparent* and being honest about the issues emerging. Kevin recommends being "as empathetic as possible with whoever is suffering or damaged". The same is mentioned by Mary who emphasises the need to "always be transparent" in any situation.

Four of the interviewees also outlined some details about the use of social media platforms in times of crisis and many pointed out that social media enables you to have a stronger voice amongst all the noise in the media and helps reach a far larger audience (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). As Samuel states, “social media is an opportunity to put your story out there” and ensure that the public is also understanding the company’s position in relation to the crisis happening. Many of the participants even have a clear communication strategy that they adopt, as John states that his company has “very strong guidelines on how things are communicated” and ensuring the right wording is being used throughout this communication (John, Samuel). This is an element that is also outlined by Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith (2008) as well as Maresh-Fuehrer and Smith (2016), in which they stated that there has been very little research done on how to integrate the communication tools of social media so as to develop a risk and crisis management plan. For this reason, it is also important for companies to start developing these outlines and guidelines to follow in times of crises.

Finally, another important element of dealing with a crisis situation is when the response takes place. Four of the interviewees thought it is important to respond in the public sphere as it would “acknowledge it and fix the issue for the future”, as John points out. Mary also states that one should “always apologize on social media or always [apologize] [to] the public” because this ensures that if “something happened and a lot of people have already seen it, you can of course anticipate by making your own post”. This ensures that the response has a greater reach and makes sure that the people affected by it see the company is taking action against the issue. Mary, however, also advocated to take a more private and personal approach in which a company should “reach out to the person who is complaining or reach out to the journalist who's writing it wrong, and then be personal about it”. That being said, it was also explained that many of the interviewees felt that there was a rising sensitivity to scandals and what can be considered a crisis, as John said, “some companies treat everything as a crisis. [...] That's not necessarily the case”. This is an element that also contributes to the confusion of when to address an issue as everything seems to be made out to be one in the age of social media. This element of determining when to react and respond in a crisis situation is one which is heavily debated by scholars and many times depends on the concrete situation at hand. Yaxley (2016) states that risk management is made up of two main parts, notably, assessing the likelihood of a crisis and assessing the possible impact of it. She points out that different companies have different ways of doing this, one being to conduct causal modelling and to forecast the different possible outcomes to the crises. Overall, she states that it is beneficial to assess the possible options to deal with a crisis and the possible outcomes of it, but the reaction may be very dependent on the company and crisis, itself.

4.3. Social reach and strategy

The third theme which was extracted from the interviews was that of ‘social reach and strategy’. This is yet another important element of PR as it is related to the public image of the company as well as the reach the company has. A lot of PR is based on strategies related to social media and communications, which are important elements contributing to the reach a company has. This theme was created on the basis that many of the responses referred to reach as an important element of their job, along with communication and social strategies, the importance of the customer and content creation. These were classified together because they are related to the actions companies take in order to reach the public.

4.3.1. Maximising Reach

This first sub-theme relates to the reach a company has in terms of their content as well as their products. An important element in this, and one which was discussed by five of the interviewees, is that of spreading one’s content and increasing the reach one has on social media, which go hand in hand. According to George, “it's super important that everything I do is visible. I don’t think there's a thing that I’ve written that you won't see live”. This is an important factor in the communications and marketing of the company as its success is largely dependent on the reach and impact it has on others (Eriksson & Olsson, 2016). This concept is not only related to ensuring the content one provides reaches a large range of people but also ensuring that the content reaches the relevant audiences who might take interest. This can be seen with John who states that:

> “while some companies might only target their social media at their userbase or at their potential clients, we target it at everyone who is relevant to the field we're in, so all recruiters, all HR people, everyone involved in hiring”.

This indicates that it is indeed important to reach a broad range of people but beyond that it is also important that the people who are targeted are relevant to the field the company is in as this guarantees that the audience consuming the content have real interest in it and might contribute to the company's success (Theaker, 2016; Ndlela, 2019). This is an element that does go in contrast to what the interviewees were claiming about the changes in algorithms on these social media websites, preventing them from reaching their audience due to the high volume of content, a lot of which advertisements, present on the platforms. This is an element which will be further discussed within the next section of the paper.

Another important element in the reach a company has is about gaining awareness in the public about their brand. Many of the interviewees pointed out that it's important for the company name to be known by the relevant public and increasing awareness of the brand. As Kevin outlined, "we help our clients boost their visibility among their target audiences" and he states that "from all my clients, what all of them have in common is that they all want to boost visibility". Visibility is a very important element which determines the success of a company and a big part of PR nowadays is to ensure not only that the brand is seen in a positive light but also that it is recognized by the relevant people. One way in which this is done is through social media. This is also highlighted by Kent and Taylor (2010) in which they say that social media is a good means to reach a larger audience. Three of the participants stated that they made use of social media to generate leads. James for instance stated that "social media was like a big driver of business because we got a lot of leads from that". Richard also made a statement on this saying that as part of his job in PR "80% of it, it's really bringing new people through the door". This also shows that PR is no longer only involved with reputation and image management, but a new range of roles have been incorporated in terms of marketing and customer acquisition (Theaker, 2016) .

4.3.2. Content creation and curation

In addition to gaining reach among relevant audiences, it is also crucial for PR professionals to create content that is of interest to the targeted audiences. Multiple interviewees suggested that the relevance and quality of the content is key to leveraging the large reach companies have on social media. Creating content is an important factor when it comes to building recognition and retaining the target audience's attention, by creating content that is relevant to the company's field, but also that connects with the company's audience. This content has to be catered to the interests of the target audiences and should be addressing trends that are relevant in the industry (Theaker, 2016). As Samuel points out, "content generation has become really really important for PR consultants". The way in which he ensures that the content is appropriate for his clients is to “come up with long-term plans, develop ideas, content pieces with them”, which shows that having a strategy for creating and spreading relevant content is an important element of the PR profession these days. This quote even suggests working with the target audience to develop content that they will relate to and be interested in. Due to increasing saturation on social channels these days, it is important to ensure one stands out as a company by providing the most relevant information and ensuring one is perceived as a trusted source. As George outlines, it is important to “generate interest” based on “current trends” because these are the types of content that get the most recognition and reach. George states that content creation is “not just meant to generate leads for a product”. This demonstrates that another element that was deemed important by the interviewees was discussing the relevant topics within the industry in their content. This would also help generate more interest amongst the audience as more topics are being discussed, meaning more people might find it interesting. George for instance works in the field of internal communications and in his content he writes about how “other fields can influence internal communications and what internal communications can learn from other fields” because this then includes a broader audience who may be interested in these other fields.

Many of the interviewees also have a more concrete strategy in place for their content creation, such as having a content calendar. Peter for instance has:

> “a content manager and he's managing our social media activities and we set up a content calendar. He writes articles for that calendar. And we identified a couple of topics which are relevant to our audience”.

Mark also has a strategy in which he keeps “a daily stream of social media postings [that are] mainly promoting our products and news”. This is something that can keep the public engaged and ensure they follow what the company is doing and keep up to date with it, thus increasing awareness.

4.3.3. Customer Centricity

A major part of what content creation entails, as mentioned throughout the previous section, is to target the relevant audiences and provide content that might be of interest to a broader sample (Theaker, 2016). From talking to the interviewees, it becomes clear that while having a large reach is crucial for communications professionals, it is more important that they target the right audience. Therefore, the content they create and the approach they take in their communications has to be valuable and customer centric. This is an element which was widely discussed by the interviewees, especially in terms of targeting the right people. This was outlined by seven of the interviewees throughout, in which they discuss what audiences they want to target and how they curate the content accordingly. George, for example, targets "tech companies because they are a good match for our products". Samuel even has a more concrete strategy in place in which he

> "will be essentially researching the market, researching which are the leading publications in that space, creating a media list, going online, doing desk research to find out which conferences are the most attended, which ones have the most influence within the sector, looking online to find who are the kind of influencers. […] I will then come up with a strategy on how I'm going to target those publications".

Many of the interviewees also pointed out that they try to broaden their target audience, such as John, whose "strategy is supposed to include both users, potential users, but also relevant audience who might never be users" which simply enables them to have a larger reach in the industry, gaining interest from a larger, yet still relevant audience.

The way in which the interviewees explained that they curate their content is by learning what the public they are targeting is interested in. Richard for instance stated, much in line with James and George, that the important part for him is "about really understanding what these people need" and that "when you truly understand your audience, the challenge and the tactics are less important because you know what they need and what they want". This shows that the focus is set on keeping the customer happy and ensuring they are receiving what they expect and need from the company.

Another element outlined by four of the participants was that it is important to engage with the public because, as Samuel puts it, it "is a way to engage with them and enhance their relationship and add a bit more value basically". As outlined previously, the relationships built are a very important element of PR and this applies just as much to the relationships that the company maintains with their customers, ensuring that they are satisfied and have appropriate means to connect to the company and be able to engage in a conversation (Valentini, 2015). This is also outlined by Jason, stating that "relationship with customers and customer experience management and customer complaints and customer information became more and more important", demonstrating the contribution it has to PR. Macnamara and Zerfass (2012), similarly to Kent and Taylor (2010), believe that in maintaining and fostering these relationships with their audience, social media can have a great contribution as it enables the company to have a more direct conversation with the public and engage with them.

4.3.4. Communication and social strategies

Much of what is involved in increasing reach and awareness has got to do with the way in which the company communicates towards its audiences and through which means they spread their content. For this reason, another major theme extracted from the interviews was related to the strategies that are adopted by these PR practitioners on ways to communicate online as well as strategies for social media usage. James, who works for a pharmaceutical company, outlined that the guidelines to communications and social media activities were an extremely important part of his job, especially due to the sensitive issue of selling medicine. He outlines how his company has

> “literally documentation on, [we] don't want to say this sentence. This is a good answer that worked for us on this question. Don't use these words. Don't ever use product names, don’t use disease names”.

This shows how some companies must follow very strict guidelines when communicating with the public because if something is said in the wrong way it can easily result in negative consequences for this company. It must however be noted that due to the nature of the company, being based on pharmaceutical products, the communications will have strict guidelines as there are legal reasons behind it which could have major repercussions, but is still important to consider within the broader scope.

Many of the interviewees still emphasized the importance of having a consistent communication amongst the channels they’re present in. As Kevin specifies, “it’s really important across social media that everything is consistent with the brand and so we communicate the right thing to the right people”. Some other interviewees had a more concrete strategy in regard to this such as Mark who has “a social media strategy that we have [...] social media templates that we use, where we have a certain tone of voice that we use. That's very important” and that “for usual day-to-day social media use we have guidelines”. This shows that the communications a company has with the public cannot be taken lightly as there needs to be consistency amongst the channels, ensuring that the message isn’t skewed and that wrong things aren’t being said by other members of the company. This is also something which was strongly recommended by Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith (2008), as well as Maresh-Fuehrer and

Smith (2016), as being one of the important stages of issues management. When it comes to managing PR issues, Maresh-Fuehrer and Smith (2016) even state that “social media is an important tool that cannot be ignored” (p. 621). They explain that due to the lack of research on the topic there are only very few companies that have developed a communication strategy for social media, but that it is still important to do so.

As mentioned in the previous sections, the interviewees also make sure they are up to date with what is being said about the company and the discussion revolving around it on social media. For this reason, for many companies they monitor social media discussions to ensure they are not being talked about negatively or being dragged into controversies (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Maresh-Fuehrer & Smith, 2016). As John pointed out:

> “we use a lot of social listening, so we do social monitoring, we can use tools like Brand24 and Mention;, they give you an idea of when your company's being mentioned online and you can see what's being said”.

This can many times prevent any issues from happening and also enables the company to engage with the public when a comment is made about them (Maresh-Fuehrer & Smith, 2016).

Some other minor strategies were also adopted in regard to responding on social media when customers or publications ask questions. Oftentimes, companies have dedicated people for handling direct communications with the public. In James’ case for instance, when it came to social media conversations, he “was the only person that was allowed to respond to anything”. Richard has a similar perspective as “whenever a journalist speaks to somebody in your company, they will speak to the right people”, ensuring that the right wording is being used throughout the communications and no false or misleading information will be shared.

The insights from the interviewees above demonstrates the importance for companies to not only reach a large audience, but to also ensure that the audience is relevant to their product or brand. The need for companies to incorporate customer centricity and valuable content in their strategy is becoming more evident as the field of PR and communications evolves.

4.4. PR in a constant state of change

The final main theme that was gathered from the interviews was that of the ever-changing and rapidly evolving nature of PR as a field. This is an important element of the paper as it offers perspective and a degree of nuance to understanding how companies practice PR in the digital age. Whilst it is clear that the rise of digital media and social networks has had a major impact on companies' PR practices and the day to day of PR practitioners, it is important to note that a number of interviewees suggested that the field of PR is in a state of constant change. This means that the practices and principles discussed throughout this paper will likely be subject to change as time passes and new technologies and channels emerge. Understanding the differing attitudes towards PR and some of the trends that can be noticed when observing these attitudes, provides crucial information for contextualising the previous sections of this study. This theme was discussed quite broadly with the interviewees, oftentimes calling into question a number of the claims made throughout the literature on this topic. This theme touches upon the sub themes of the evolving perceptions on PR, discussing how different practitioners perceive PR as a professional field and its functions, followed by rising social media ambivalence in which they discuss their opinions on the effectiveness of social media and its positive and negative impacts.

4.4.1. Evolving Perceptions on PR

This first subtheme discussed the perceptions of the interviewees about what public relations is and how the profession is seen in the field. One of the big and recurring topics in this, as mentioned by five of the participants, is that PR shouldn't be regarded as an individual practice but rather as a mix of different fields. George points this out by saying "I always feel like PR is a part of the marketing mix and […] I don't feel the need for one specific person to take care of PR". This similarly relates to Kevin's opinion, in which he says "that's where I see the value of PR... the integration with PR and growth marketing". The argument behind this perspective is that PR works well in accordance with other areas that are related to communications or marketing. PR practices have changed over time and the roles of PR practitioners are very much in line with other fields such as marketing and communication and thus it no longer makes sense to separate them (Ndlela, 2019). This can also be seen with John, who says that "we don't differentiate strongly between PR and social media and communications. We do that jointly, strategically speaking". Of all the interviewees most of them worked with PR as part of the broader field of marketing and communications. This can be seen with Richard, John and Peter who all manage a PR team for their company, but they are also in charge of the growth marketing. This integration of different disciplines with PR can be partly related to the changes in the communication fields over time but one can note that these interviewees may also hold different opinions on this because they work for smaller companies. Smaller companies, especially ones which are B2B, may not be as confronted with the issues of public opinion as corporations would be, and as a result do not need or want people dedicated full time to just PR (Valentini, 2015).

In line with the previous point, another element that was widely discussed by the participants was the fact that PR has very few guidelines in place in practice. This is one of the issues in associating or accrediting value to the profession as there is no clear strategy in PR, it being a mix of disciplines. Mark points this out by stating that “PR is really hard to measure but there are more ways to do it, I think, than back in the days”, which indicates that PR has been going through changes over the years, suggesting that any study on PR practices will to some extent always be a snapshot in time as those are also likely to change and evolve, making it a more complicated field to define and understand. In fact, according to Kevin “a lot of people don’t understand PR. That’s the main problem with working in PR”. This makes defining what PR is a very difficult task as its also “hard to prove tangible, let's say metrics for it” as Richard outlined. The interviewees also explain that PR can differ a lot based on the industry the company is in. Kevin, as well as Mark, for instance point out how B2C and B2B brands can have different PR strategies as “B2C brands work way more with us on social media than between brands”.

As one can see above, PR is a field that is constantly evolving and becoming increasingly difficult to define. That being said, a number of the interviewees did emphasize some underlying themes and principles that appear less subject to change. Six of the participants explained PR as being a lot about storytelling, or the way George describes it, as “the truth well told”. James and Mary even explicitly stated that a big part of what PR is, is about “storytelling”. The idea behind PR is to support and enforce a certain public image and this is done mainly through communications and so it is up to the PR practitioner to say “what's the role of your company in the society? What kind of impacts are you making? […] because as a journalist, that's what you want to see, how you tell the story”, as outlined by Kevin. Jason, however, clarifies that there are some limits that have to be drawn in the idea of storytelling as this can lead to being the “kinds of people who’ve always been trying to manipulate and influence journalists and getting their own way of looking at the world”. These are the PR practitioners that have given a bad name to the profession, many being referred to as ‘spin doctors’ under the idea that they are twisting the truth in their favour, something which was criticized by all the participants throughout the interviewing process (Theaker, 2016).

In addition to storytelling, four other interviewees regarded PR to be about relationship management. As John puts it "PR Is essentially managing the relations your company has with the public sphere". Richard made a similar statement in which he claimed that "PR, as the name implies, it's a people business". This can be related back to the first theme of this research which outlines the importance of having strong and relevant contacts and maintaining these relationships. This was similarly outlined by Veil, Buehner and Palenchar (2011) as they describe both PR and social media to be about managing the relationships the company has, whether it be with their customers, stakeholders or other contacts.

A further five participants also outlined how PR is about the various efforts that go into maintaining a positive public image, an element which has been widely discussed throughout the analysis as well as within the literature. As stated by John, "PR is about nurturing, fostering and presenting your brand's image in the public sphere and making sure that it has a high reach, a high recognition value and a high level of favorability". George also supports this view by stating that "PR, is literally about managing the reputation of your brand". These just further show that public image and reputation are the core elements to PR practices.

Finally three of the participants, explained PR to be a corporate practice, which would explain the differing views on the field. It was outlined that PR is more suitable for major companies or corporations and that, as Richard stated, "it makes sense" to have a dedicated team for PR but in cases where the company is quite small in size it would make sense to combine it with other relevant areas, an idea that was presented by George. James even goes as far as to say that "it could even be an interesting strategy for them to just stop doing PR at all because they're just spending a lot of money and resources on something that will never be your best friend". This is an element which Kevin seemed to disagree with as he stated that "100% every company needs PR". That being said it is important to take into consideration that most of the participants of this research worked for smaller sized companies and might thus be more inclined to have a smaller PR department due to their experiences and needs. That being said, though larger corporations might have different perspectives on PR when compared to smaller tech companies, it is important to note that major corporations around the world are undergoing digital transformations, often geared towards adopting the practices and approaches of smaller tech companies.

Whether a company is small or large, it is safe to say that the impact and changeable nature of technology is blurring the lines when it comes to defining PR as a field. Though the interviewees highlighted some core principles in defining PR, it is clear that any definition will likely remain fluid and subject to change.

4.4.2. Rising Social media ambivalence

One of the key drivers of change in the field of PR is the evolution of technology and especially that of social media, which has impacted the field of PR in more ways than one. Over the past years, the social media landscape has continued to develop and change, making it one of the most changeable factors within the field of PR. This might also explain some of the key discrepancies observed between the PR professionals that were interviewed and the way in which PR practice is described within the literature. Throughout much of the literature, it was repeatedly outlined that social media plays a large role in PR practices, however this was very much debated by the participants in this research. Throughout the interviews there was an ambivalence about social media, with the interviewees providing a range of different opinions on the topic, both positive and negative. On the one hand, one could note that a range of interviewees, four to be specific, did maintain the idea that social media is indeed an important platform and companies should be active on these. As Samuel points out, especially as time goes by, “social media has become more and more important”. Kevin also points to the benefits of it stating that “we try to get some press coverage for all the events they organized”, proving that social media is a good means for achieving a higher reach. On the other hand, we can see with John this seems to be less the case as he claims “social media is becoming less important as time goes by, but it's still very important”. John doesn’t discredit social media as being important in general but, as he says “I don't think that social media has a strong future”. This shows that there are quite mixed opinions from the get-go about the importance of incorporating social media into PR practices. There are likely a number of explanations behind the discrepancies between the interviewees and the literature, ranging from the types of companies involved, to the industries they are in. However, one likely explanation for this discrepancy is that the social media landscape is constantly changing. From the emergence of new social media platforms, to changes in their algorithms, to issues related to data privacy, both the ethical and practical perceptions on social media are changing and likely impacting companies’ views and approaches to PR.

The above mentioned ambivalence towards social media is reflected in the mixed perceptions offered by the interviewees. One of the benefits of social media, as outlined by

George, James and John, is that it enables “that direct way to contact people” (George), and that it helps with “just being able to be more personal with the audience rather than if you send an email out to a lot of people” (John). This is one of the more positive sides that many of the interviewees discussed, stating that having a conversation with the public is an important element in reputation management, as mentioned in the previous sections, and one main way this can be done is through the means of social media. This is an element which was also outlined by Kent and Taylor (2010) as they highlight the importance of engaging with the public and promote social media as a platform for doing so.

A more negative element within social media, which was addressed by eight of the participants, is the rise of paid and sponsored content on the platforms and the negative impacts these have on their ability to use them. This is an issue that almost every practitioner that was interviewed brought up as a major setback of social media. As Kevin puts it, “it's really if you don't advertise or sponsor with money, then it's impossible to reach your audience. Even if people are following you”. This is something which is quite new to these channels as it was not as much of an issue in the early days of social media. Jason outlined this by explaining the concept of “native advertising” and how “it's regarded normal now and nobody's fired for it, people are even praised for it. As long as the money is going to the newspaper”. This is an element which wasn’t as much of a threat in previous years but is becoming increasingly present on these platforms. As Peter also explained a few years ago he “saw the rise of Facebook, but quite rapidly after, I think three or four years ago, I saw a big rise in Facebook advertising”, showing that this is a recent phenomenon actually impacting their profession.

Khang Ki and Ye (2012) also made a point about this in which they stated that increasingly, the platforms are being used to create brand communities as well as start advertising campaigns. A large contributing factor to this, as outlined by four of the interviewees, are the changes in the algorithms being used by these channels. Kevin explains this by saying “I think the most important shift that I've seen is that social media, first in terms of the algorithms, they were... It was easier to engage with the audience without advertising”. This outlines how the rise of paid content on social media is making it harder for them to engage with the public, this being one of the core reasons they would use social media in the first place. In accordance with these changes, three of the participants also estimated that as social media declines, we will see a rise in the use of messaging platforms. Peter even points out that “we tend to see messaging platforms, messaging apps, as the new social media compared to newsfeed sharing”. This shows how digital media is constantly evolving and how social media is slowly losing prominence in the field of PR as they are more interested with “one on one communication”, as Peter says, rather than posting on news feeds which are being dictated by advertising and promotions.

Another element which was shown in a more negative light was the quantity of content as well as people present on social media platforms. Peter expressed this by using a metaphor about a highway stating:

> “The highway was easy, but now there are so many cars and trucks and big brands and even trains on that highway […] you're posting like your little thingy, like a really small car and it gets overseen by all the big trucks the big companies that try to pass by”.

This shows that oftentimes the content that is being put out won’t actually reach the target audience because they are already being targeted by every other brand possible. As Richard puts it “at the end, what it’s becoming, is a complete overload”. This is an issue which is also intensified by the fact that the attention spans of the newer generations are getting shorter, “So you have the same message, but you have less and less of a window to give it to people. Their attention is being bought by every company in the world and you get five seconds”, as Richard explains. McCorkindale also highlighted this by stating that around 69% of companies on the Fortune 500 are present on social media (McCorkindale, as cited by Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012), which shows that there is indeed a major increase in these activities and content, making it harder for the smaller companies to get a hold of their target audience.

Finally, a last reasoning that was mentioned by a majority of the participants was that along with there being too much content on these channels, there is also a lack of trust involved. As James explains, “I think now in the US that's kind of going the opposite because nobody trusts media anymore”. Jason criticizes the rise of “all sorts of people on Twitter spreading fake news” which makes it “harder and harder to judge what is right and what is wrong in that sense”. This is an issue which can be accredited to the widespread use of these channels as well as, what Richard says, “where anybody can post anything”, meaning there is no validation that the sources are trustworthy. Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith (2008) allude to this, as in the past most of the valuable content was created by journalists but nowadays it is no longer them who accredit value to content but the public that does so, making it much harder to understand what is and isn’t trustworthy anymore. Whilst the practitioners do make use of the social media channels in basic ways such as acquiring reach or having a conversation with the public, most of them agree that social media is a very secondary channel for them. According to Kevin, “social media for us is like a tool to support what we're doing”. Even Richard states that “the problem for me with social media is that, sure you can spike some interest, but it's not kind of like the final conversation driver”. This shows that there might be some benefits to social media that the practitioners may make use of but on a grand scale social media seems to be a secondary platform for their PR practices.

It is undeniable that social media has changed the way in which people communicate and that it is something that any PR professional has to incorporate into their practices. However, it is clear from the interviews that social media is often regarded more as an external factor that they need to account for, rather than a tool they seek to leverage. The evolution of technology and the changing nature of communications as a whole explain why there are discrepancies, not only between the literature and the interviewees, but also amongst the interviewees themselves. This ties back to the literature, where Kent and Taylor (2010) and Moreno et al. (2015) claimed that there was little evidence that social media was a positive tool for enhancing PR practices.

The research above shows that the social media landscape and the field of PR as a whole are constantly in a state of change. Though it there is real value in understanding how companies approach public relations, it is important to do so with the knowledge that PR is in a constant state of change, as demonstrated by the discrepancies between the literature and the interviewees.

5. Conclusion

Public relations is a practice which is key to almost any company's public image and reputation. In recent years, the practice has undergone critical changes with the emergence of new technologies and means of communication, most notably the rise of social media. As technology and communications is constantly evolving, the academic literature on modern PR practices is often lacking or struggling to keep up with the most recent developments and trends. As a result, there are few widely accepted approaches and guidelines for PR practitioners to follow. In addition to this, social media has emerged as a powerful, but unregulated platform that consistently contributes to the struggles faced by PR professionals today. For this reason it was interesting and relevant to delve into these newfound practices by relying on new and old literature on the topic as well as interviewing practicing PR professionals on the changes within their profession. Key factors in the PR profession are public image and reputation management as well as risk aversion and crisis management. These practices have been undergoing significant changes as social media becomes an important channel for companies as well as the public, opening unprecedented lines of direct and mass communication. For this reason, this thesis attempted to answer the question of how public relations professionals perceive and respond to the changes in their profession with the emergence of new social media practices.

5.1. Summary of Findings

Following the data collection process, which consisted of ten interviews with PR practitioners, the data was analysed using a grounded theory coding process. After having coded the transcripts, and interpreted and narrowed down the codes, four major selective codes were able to be extracted from the data. These selective codes, or main themes, are representative of the results to the research question, in combination with the theory, which will be discussed below. The sections were thus split based on these selective codes, which were explained through the axial codes, which in turn were explained through the open codes.

The first theme that was extracted from the data was that of "access to network and information", which outlined how the interviewees attached a lot of importance to maintain good relationships with *high impact contacts*, as these can be helpful in fostering and sharing a positive public image for the company. They also explained the importance of being mentioned in *high quality source*s as many of the interviewees expressed their preference of being mentioned by good sources rather than many. Then, this study proceeded to discuss the importance of *market and trend awareness*, which involved the importance of following trends and staying up to date, mainly through reading and networking.

The second theme was about “nurturing the public image”, which means any efforts made by the practitioners to contribute to or strengthen their public image. The interviewees argued that this is done through certain strategies of *reputation management*. The interviewees outlined how they adopt communications strategies so as to portray and push a certain image based on their perceived values. Much in line with this, the second sub-theme which was discussed was that of *adherence to values*. This is quite similar to the previous one, however, it is less about strategies adopted to portray the values but rather about internally adhering to them, thus contributing to their public image. Following this, the third sub theme discussed the importance of *trust and transparency* as all the interviewees were very adamant about the value of being transparent in the company’s communications. This was an element which was also outlined throughout the literature as an important factor. Whilst acknowledging certain limits to transparency, they still strongly believe it to be a beneficial factor contributing to their public image. The final subtheme was that of *risk and crisis management* in which the interviewees outlined certain strategies they adopt in dealing with an issue or crisis. Many asserted that they lacked such a strategy due to the small size of their company and outlined that it is mainly context-based action.

The third theme was that of “social reach and strategy” in which the importance of *maximising reach* was discussed as the interviewees attempt to have their content be seen by a larger audience and attain such reach through social channels. Following this, *content creation and curation* was discussed in which the interviewees explained their content creation strategy so as to include a broader range of interests, thus reaching more people and more importantly, targeting the relevant audiences. This was followed by *customer centricity*, an element directly linked to the previous point as the interviewees stated how they target specific audiences and attempt to create products and content that are relevant to their audience’s lives. The final subtheme was that of *communication and social strategies* which, in essence, explains how the PR practitioners increased their visibility and awareness through certain strategies they adopted on social media, and more generally with their communication. Overall this theme focused largely on the element of reach as each section elaborates on the different ways and reasonings as to how and why companies attempt to reach a large, but also relevant, audience.

Finally, the last theme from the data was that of "PR in a constant state of change", focusing on the changes in PR practices over the last decade and the impacts it has had on PR as a field. This was done by elaborating on the *evolving perceptions on PR* in which the interviewees gave details about their perceptions of what PR entails and how their practices have changed in accordance to their role in the field of PR. Most interviewees focused on the lack of guidelines to follow in the practice of PR along with the fact that it has turned into a multi-dimensional practice that is usually intertwined with other areas of marketing and communications. The second and final subtheme was that of *rising social media ambivalence* in which the practitioners strongly call into question the relevance and impact of social media as a tool for PR. It was in this section that much of the prior research was debated and nuance was outlined in understanding how PR should be practiced in the digital age. One key conclusion was that social media has an undeniable impact on PR and communications, but that it is likely more of an external factor that companies need to account for, rather than a PR tool they can leverage.

Overall, one can note that each of these themes come together to illustrate how the evolution of technology and especially social media has impacted the field of PR in multiple ways. The interviewees outlined how social media provides access to a large set of networks and contacts that can be used to strengthen the awareness and visibility of the company. Social media has also become a key factor when it comes to building a company's reputation and constructing an image for the public through the content they spread and their ways of communicating. This is also more concretely outlined in the third theme as more elaborate strategies are outlined for leveraging or handling these channels. Finally, one can see how PR has changed in a very broad sense, with the interviewees delving into specifics about their role. Then, there are also some limitations which are outlined by the interviewees to the effectiveness and benefits of social media use. All in all, these elements point to the fact that social media has had major impacts on the practices of PR professionals.

5.2. Limitations of the research

Whilst this paper seems to have contributed interesting and relevant insights into this field of research, it must also be outlined that there may be certain limitations to the research. One of the main elements that must be addressed as a limitation would be the subjective nature of qualitative research. Much of the analysis and interpretation is based on the point of view or perceptions of the researcher and may thus be influenced based on the researcher's background, social status, gender and other such demographics. For this reason some of the results could differ if the study were conducted by a different researcher. I am aware of such limitations and setbacks and for this reason tried to ensure objectivity to the extent that I was able to. One way in which this was done was by ensuring that the coding process was done independently of what prior research may imply, to ensure that the codes were not being influenced by prior knowledge on the subject, an element highly recommended in grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2014). This is, however, an accepted fact in qualitative research as it cannot be avoided due to the nature of the research method being largely based on interpretations. That being said, I can guarantee complete transparency in the way the research was conducted as well as the coding and interpretation process, thus proving the reliability of the research.

Another limitation to take into consideration is that of the sample, in terms of the size but also the characteristics of the participants. Firstly, it is worth pointing out that due to time constraints for the PR professionals, not all were able to participate, and some not to the extent that was hoped for. This was, however, outlined in the methodology as one of the limits. It would thus be beneficial to have a larger sample size and be able to go more in depth in some of the interviews which were conducted. Apart from this, there may also be limitations in the participants, themselves, as many worked in the tech scene, many also based in Amsterdam and also being in a more B2B-centric sector, which has potential to influence their opinions and thus their perceptions on their profession. Due to the fact that the sample was not very diverse and many of the interviewees shared similar roles, the research may be limited to these fields and not fully take into consideration the broader scope of PR practices. Lastly, one final potential limitation that should be noted about the sample is the gender discrepancy. Only one woman was included in the sample and thus there may not be sufficient representation of gender to explore potential differences accordingly. It is also important to point out that according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019), PR seems to be a female-dominated field which makes the difficulty in accessing female PR practitioners to participate in the interview research a contradictory factor. One explanation for this could be that, as this research found, PR is becoming more holistically integrated with other areas of marketing and communication, meaning that traditional demographics on PR might not be representative of the reality of PR practices. That being said, this potential limitation still needs to be taken into account.

5.3. Recommendations for future research

The focus of this study was on researching how PR professionals perceived their roles to have changed over time with the rise and widespread adoption of social media. As outlined in the previous section, one of the limitations of this study was that the practitioners who were interviewed, largely came from similar fields and most worked in smaller sized companies. Much of the literature available on PR and its practices use bigger companies and even corporations as examples or points of reference. For this reason it may prove to be useful to conduct a study including larger companies and corporates so as to be able to relate it to the literature and theory more accurately.

In addition to this, as was discussed by many of the interviewees, the profession of PR has progressively been integrating different fields into the role. This was demonstrated by this study, as many of the participants of this research had marketing and growth activities as part of their role in PR and even stated that PR has become increasingly multi-dimensional. For this reason, it may be interesting to look into other fields and how they have been impacted since the rise of social media and potentially find common themes. It would also be interesting to study the evolution of PR within the context of the evolution of marketing as a whole in recent years, with the emergence of new approaches such as agile marketing and growth hacking. The online landscape has become very relevant and gained much potential in many roles and positions in a company whether it be marketing, advertising, growth or any other roles involving communication with the public. This may also lead to some new findings on social media usage from a business standpoint. This study also outlined the lack of research conducted on social media practices in a company and has proven it to be very unregulated. A research delving into the benefits of social media, providing concrete evidence of its effectiveness, and exploring the most efficient ways to make use of these channels may contribute great amounts to a range of important roles in any company.

All in all, this study has proven to be a valuable contribution to research that has been conducted on this or other similar topics as it addressed many elements which have been discussed by a range of scholars whilst also putting into question many other elements in light of recent developments within the field. This study was able to contribute new research into the field of PR and social media, with much of the current literature being relatively outdated and not fully considering the implications of the rise of social media. The perceptions of many of the participants in the interviews proved that much has changed over the last decade in the practices and field of PR. These practitioners gave insights to certain limitations in the theory and literature whilst also contributing new ideas and concepts that would be interesting to do further research on.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Introductory Questions

Can you introduce yourself? What's your position in the company? What are your main responsibilities? How long have you been working for the company? …

To start off, as a PR practitioner, how would you describe PR as a professional field?

(1) **Daily practices and usage of social media platforms**,

- What are your day-to-day responsibilities?
- How does social media come into play for this?
- What role does social media play in your responsibilities in PR?

(2) **Changes in practices with introduction of social media**,

- What has been your experience in working with PR? How has social media been a part of that?
- In what way do you take social media into consideration when making decisions for certain projects?

(3) **Transition and reaction times in using social media**,

- How important is it for you stay up to date with current trends?
- How do you ensure that you are up to date?
- Do you have concrete strategies for catering to or targeting specific audiences?
- How do you stay up with current trends and how does this impact what you do?

(4) **Maintaining a positive public image in media**,

- What are your day-to-day efforts in keeping up the reputation of the company? //What do PR professionals have to do to keep up with shifting opinions from the public, ensuring they maintain a positive image?
- How do you create your content in order to attain a certain reputation or create a positive public image?
- What role does posting on social media accounts have in keeping up or creating a certain image? What does this sort of content look like?

(5) **Risk and Issues Management,**

(Two topics: 1. Identifying the issue, 2. Dealing with the issue)

- What strategies do you use to assess potential risk for the company?
- What would you categorise as a crisis in PR for your company?
- What are the first steps to assessing the harm a potential issue may have on the company?
- What determines a substantial issue and what is the process for addressing and solving such an issue?
- When a substantial issue is identified, what are the first steps to addressing it and then, progressively, solving it?
- In what way would social media be used, if at all, when dealing with a PR issue?

Closing Questions

To what extent does PR simply cover up bad practice? Can you do PR for any company? Do you have to believe in the products of your company to work for it?

Grounded Theory Coding Process

Open, Axial and Selective codes

As mentioned in the Methodology section of this paper, after having cleaned and grouped the 765 open codes together, 166 open codes were left. For the sake of clarity, the table below will present the axial and selective codes and outline the 3 main open codes that correspond to each axial code.

Example Open codes	**Axial codes**	**Selective codes**
Relevant / meaningful contacts	High Impact contacts	Access to network and information
Getting help/reach from quality contacts		
Being seen in right places and right contacts		
Recommended / mentioned by trusted sources	High quality sources	
Quality of sources over quantity		
Being selective about sources to be in		
Reading to stay updated	Market and trends awareness	
Networking to stay updated		
Social media as bad for updates		
Monitoring social media	Risk and crisis management	Nurturing the public image
Strategy as context specific		
Social media use in crisis		
Communicating values / image	Adherence to values	

Contribution to society		
Success reflected on belief		
Importance of transparency	Trust and Transparency	
Information leaks		
Limits to transparency		
Representing an image	Reputation management	
Publicising vision / values		
Communication in line with vision / values		
Communication / conduct strategy on social media	Communication and social strategies	Social reach and strategy
Social media strategies and responses		
Monitoring social media		
Create content based off interests	Content creation and curation	
Content calendar		
Discussing relevant fields / topics in content		
Spreading content / gaining reach on social media	Maximising reach	
Strategy for spreading content		
Gaining attention / visibility		
Target specific audiences	Customer Centricity	
Engaging with public		
Knowing the public's interests		
Few guidelines to PR	Evolving perceptions of PR	PR in a constant state of change
PR differs		

PR as storytelling		
Rise of paid / sponsored content on social media	Rising social media ambivalence	
Rise and fall of social media		
Social media as secondary		