

## **Contribution of online corporate communication to brand reputation among Millennials in the Vaal region**

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## **Abstract**

Over the past few years the Internet has become one of the most powerful communication tools. This has led to the evolution of the public relations discipline in keeping up with trends, embracing new opportunities and using diverse and effective communication mediums to engage with different stakeholders. This article looks at the contribution of online corporate communication to brand reputation amongst Millennials in the Vaal Region and the effect it can have on the perceived reputation of an organisation. This was done through ascertaining ways in which Millennials in the Vaal Region use different online corporate communication tools to engage with brands, looking at the nature of their online engagement with brands and factors of online communication influencing corporate reputation. This quantitative study used a cross-sectional descriptive research approach. Two hundred questionnaires were collected from Generation Y members between the ages of 18-35 in the Vaal Region. The findings indicate that the Millennials in Vaal region use online communication as a main source of brand information and brand engagement.

Key words: brand reputation, online communication, reputation, Millennials, Generation Y, corporate communication, public relations, South Africa, consumer engagement

## **INTRODUCTION**

The success of any modern business today depends increasingly on what customers and other stakeholders think about the company's actions. This has given added impetus and importance to the role of corporate communication in building corporate reputation and relationships with the stakeholders in a systematic and continuous manner. In the contemporary world organisations increasingly use online communication to communicate with the stakeholders, build their brands and strengthen their reputation.

Because of the growing importance of Millennials – also called the Generation Y – as a consumer and social force in South Africa, it is essential to understand how its members use online communication and engage with brands using online communication. Generation Y is a unique and influential consumer group, born during the time of computers and the Internet, whose formative years were during 1990s and 2000s (Heaney 2007, 198), whose behaviour is often discussed, but not fully understood. Understanding how Generation Y consumers use online corporate communication to engage with brands and how this communication influences their perceptions of the corporate reputation of organisations is essential for effective reputation management.

The purpose of this article is to look at how Millennials in the Vaal region use online corporate communication to engage with the brands, and how online corporate communication influences their perception of the reputation of organisations.

## **THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION**

A significant amount of research on Millennials' use of online communication and engagement with the brands has been done worldwide (e.g. Barker et al. 2013; Benckendorff et al. 2010; Bolton et al. 2013; Lenhart et al. 2010). However, only a handful of studies on the topic have been conducted in South Africa. Among these are Duffet and Wakeham's (2016) research into the effects of social media marketing on attitudes; Anvar and Venter (2014) researched the factors influencing the purchase of green products among Generation Y consumers; Human and Terblanche (2012)

looked at the attitude of Millennials towards cause-related marketing; Duffet (2015) researched Facebook advertising influence on intention to purchase, while Azionya (2015) researched the Millennials' use of Facebook and the implication thereof for corporate reputation.

The term 'Millennial' describes individuals who were born between 1981 and 1999 (Bolton et al. 2013). Millennials are the first generation to have always lived in a digital world. Studies show that Millennials' social media use affects their identity formation, formation of habits, their expectations regarding service, engagement with brands and firms, participation in value co-creation, brand loyalty, purchase behaviour and, ultimately, the value of a company (Bolton et al. 2013, 245). These digital natives are often described as technologically savvy and the most visually sophisticated of any generation (Palfrey and Gasser 2008, 45; Pendergast 2010, 13). They are environmentally, globally and socially aware of just about anything, including brands (Heaney 2007, 241). The research indicates that the Millennials are confident, connected, self-expressive, collaborative, seeking instant gratification, ambitious, demanding instant feedback, opinionated (Clark 2013; McCorkindale, DiStaso and Sisco 2013; Moore 2012; Pendergast 2010, Pinto and Mansfield 2012). They tend use interactive media to connect with brands for both practical and entertainment reasons (Clark 2013; Frady 2011, 43; Moore 2012), publicly express positive and negative opinion about brands (Pinto and Mansfield 2012) and enjoy interacting with the brands through social media (McCorkindale et al. 2013).

In South Africa Millennials are socially mobile, confident, ambitious, and have close emotional connections with family and friends (Azionya 2015). They espouse consumerist culture and engage in status consumption (Bevan-Dye, Garnett and De Klerk 2012, 5578). Just like their counterparts in other countries, South African Millennials are avid social media users. The main drivers for Millennials' communication about and with the brands are brand functionality, brand communication, service and responsive behaviours (Azionya 2015, 125).

## **CORPORATE REPUTATION AS ORGANISATIONAL RESOURCE**

An organisation's existence depends on the ability to acquire essential resources from the external environment and to successfully manage these environments (McAllister-Spooner and Kent 2009, 222; Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, 44) in order to make them more conducive to their operations (Smith and Hitt 2005, 433). The resources can be tangible, like money, materials and employees, or intangible, such as goodwill, reputation and brand loyalty. This research focuses on reputation as an essential organisational resource.

Various benefits of good reputation are cited in the literature. Fombrun and Van Riel (2004, 241) believe that a good reputation creates wealth and provides a sustained competitive advantage. According to Marquez and Fombrun (2005, 305), a good reputation enhances profitability because it attracts customers to products, encourages investors, increases the value of its shares, attracts better employees, helps to secure capital when needed, and helps the organisation to recover from a crisis. However, Pharoah (2003, 47) states that an excellent reputation does not automatically guarantee the success of an organisation, although a bad reputation is always a hindrance to achieving organisational objectives.

Corporate reputation can be defined as a stakeholder's overall assessment of an organisation over time (Abratt and Kleyn 2012, 1046). This evaluation is based on the stakeholder's interactions with the organisation and its brands, relationships with the organisation's employees and representatives, membership of brand communities and any other perceived communication and symbolism that provide information about the organisation's actions and or comparison with the organisation's rivals (Abratt and Kleyn 2012, 1046). Barnett, Jermier and Lafferety (2006, 33) define reputation as the observer's collective judgements of a corporation based on assessments of the financial, social and environmental impacts attributed to the corporation over time. Furthermore, the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA) indicates that reputation is not only a perception of past actions but also future behaviour, viewed in the context of how other similar organisations act.

There are a number of perspectives on what constitutes reputation. According to Reputation Institute RepTrack framework (2016), reputation consists of the following elements: products and services, innovation, workplace, good citizenship, governance

and financial performance. Fombrun (2005, 14) suggests credibility, reliability and responsibility as additional characteristics of reputation.

Roper and Fill (2012, 35) state that the main building blocks of corporate reputation are corporate personality, corporate identity and a holistic evaluation of the organisation's image, framed by the stakeholder's personal values (Neville, Bell and Menguc 2005, 1191). A component of corporate reputation, corporate identity is about how an organisation presents itself to both internal and external stakeholders (Hatch and Schultz 2000, 11), by highlighting its unique qualities (Botha et al. 2011, 254) that indicate that the organisation is a legitimate member of society with values that correspond to the values of its stakeholders. Internet communication provides ample opportunity to convey the organisational identity and influence the corporate image and, consequently, its reputation among stakeholders.

### **Online reputation management**

Much of the responsibility for managing reputation lies on 'boundary spanning' functions, such as public relations and corporate communication. Corporate communication is even sometimes defined as "the discipline that looks after reputation with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics" (CIPR 2014). Corporate reputation can be affected by corporate communication, because through the chosen messages an organisation can influence the stakeholders' understanding of its activities and establish support for the organisation's reputation (Floreddu and Cabiddu 2016, 491), as well as increase the stakeholders' trust in an organisation (Bronn 2010, 318).

The term 'online communication' refers to communication via networked computers. It encompasses synchronous computer-mediated communication (whereby people communicate in real time via chat or discussion software with all participants at their computers at the same time), asynchronous computer-mediated communication (whereby people communicate in a delayed fashion by computer, using programs such as e-mail), and the reading and writing of online documents via the World Wide Web

(Warschauer 2001, 207). Online communication has a number of characteristics that redefined contemporary corporate communication by providing opportunities for dialogue, branding, interaction and engagement, as well as conveying the corporate identity of the organisation. Social media, enabled by Web 2.0 technology, have led to an explosion of user-generated content, which provided many opportunities for creating excitement about organisations and brands. Online communication is multidirectional, it is constantly updated and allows for instant feedback and interaction. By participating in dialogue with stakeholders, organisations can gain insight into their expectations and criticism (Grub 2016, 42).

Online reputation management can be defined as “the process of positioning, monitoring, measuring, talking and listening as an organisation engages a transparent and ethical dialogue with its various online stakeholders” (Floreddu and Cabiddu (2016, 492). Thus dialogue is an essential element of reputation building. Dialogue involves creating a climate in which others are not only encouraged to participate by engaging in two-way communication, but their participation is also greatly facilitated (Kent and Taylor 2002, 27). Dialogical communication is a foundation of relationships and it involves understanding of the past and present with the focus on the shared future of participants (McAllister-Spooner and Kent 2009, 223). Kent and Taylor (2002, 25) identified the essential characteristics of dialogue as mutuality, collaboration, spirit of equality, engagement, empathy, supportiveness, confirmation, risk, vulnerability, commitment, and genuineness, among others.

Online communication also carry reputational risks for organisations because users can generate brand-related content over which the organisation has no control (Zerfass 2013, 272). Negative messages can spread quickly and can originate from any stakeholder group, including customers and employees, thereby indicating a shift in the balance of power from the organisation to the stakeholder. Online communication also blurs the boundaries between organisations and their environment more than ever before (Gulbrandsen and Just 2016, 7).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

In this study, the following research questions were answered:

- How do Millennials in the Vaal region use online sources in order to engage with brands?
- How do online corporate communication sources influence the perceptions of Millennials in the Vaal region with regard to organisational reputation?
- Which factors of online corporate reputation management are important to Millennials in the Vaal region?

A survey was designed to gather the data. The target population was individuals belonging to Generation Y in the Vaal region. According to Statistics South Africa (2011), the Emfuleni municipality, which is an administrative division overlapping with what is traditionally referred to as the Vaal region, has approximately 216 000 inhabitants aged 20 to 35. For the purpose of this study, respondents from Vanderbijlpark, Sebokeng and Evaton aged 18 to 34, (corresponding with the age of adult Millennials in 2015) were selected. As there is no sampling frame from which the population can be selected, purposive sampling was used in order to select the respondents who used the Internet and who were in the specified age category. The recommend sample size for a population (N) of 1 000 000 is 384 (n) (Krejcie and Morgan 1970). However, since the researchers used purposive sampling the results could not be generalised to the population; therefore, for practical purposes, 200 questionnaires were collected from Millennials the Vaal region. A pilot study was conducted on ten college and ten university students in Vanderbijlpark. Based on the pilot study results, minor adjustments were made to the questionnaire.

## **Data collection**

The questionnaire was developed based on the relevant literature, including the Reputation Institute model (2016) and Roper and Fill framework (2012).

**Section I** contained biographical information in Subsection A, as well as information about the preferred sources of brand information in Subsection B.

**Section II** focused on online communication behaviour and consisted of seven subsections. The questions in Subsection C were constructed in order to have an understanding of Millennials' online communication behaviour, including the use of online platforms. Subsection D pertained to the frequency of online brand engagement; Subsection E covered information sought on corporate websites; Subsection F



established whether Millennials tend to follow the brands; Subsection G investigated reasons for following the brands online, whereas Subsection H investigated the reasons for unfollowing brands online.

**Section III** looked at online reputation management. This section (Section J) contained 21 items, which probed the perceptions of respondents about online reputation management. The items were presented on a four-point scale, where 1 was 'strongly disagree', 2 'disagree', 3 'agree' and 4 was 'strongly agree'.

Cronbach Alpha was used to ensure scale reliability. All values were above the recommended 0.7. Descriptive statistics, factor analysis, t-test and one-way ANOVA were used to analyse the data obtained from the respondents.

## **RESULTS**

### **Sample characteristics**

The majority of respondents (59.5%) were female, while 40.5% were male. Three quarters of the sample were students, sixteen point one per cent (16.1%) of the sample were working and 8.5% were unemployed. The majority of respondents (53.0%) were in the 18 to 23 year age group, 35.0% in the 24 to 29 year age group, and only 12.0% of the sample involved respondents in the 30 to 35 year age group.

**Table 1. Age groups in the sample**

### **Online engagement with brands**

The data revealed that online sources are the tools most frequently used by respondents when accessing information about brands, followed by word of mouth and television (Table 2).

**Table 2: Accessing information about brands from sources**

The data also indicated that younger Millennials were more likely to rely on online sources than the older ones (Refer to Fig.1 below).

**Figure 1: The mean scores of the three age groups versus accessing information about brands online**

Respondents most often used a smartphone to access content online, followed by a laptop and a tablet.

Section D contained 13 items that probed the perceptions of respondents as to how often they made use of online sites to access the preferred brand-related content. A three point scale was used, where 1 was 'never' and 3 was 'often'. The mean of 1.76 and median of 1.77 indicate that the respondents tend to often make use of these online sites to access brand-related content. When analysing the mean scores, Facebook (D2) as online site obtained the highest mean of 2.72, indicating that most respondents often used it (78.0%), followed by YouTube (2.33) and Instagram (2.30). Based on this study and supported by the literature (Yarrow and O'Donnell 2009, 10), it can then be said that the use of online communication by Millennials requires corporate communication practitioners to focus on variety of online platforms and tools, mainly Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Section E of the questionnaire contained 20 items where respondents were asked about the information they accessed company's websites for. A KMO of 0.83 and Bartlett's sphericity of  $p < 0.000$  indicated that the information could be grouped into a smaller number of factors. Six first-order factors resulted, which explained 63.58% of the variance present. These first-order factors were reduced to one factor only, named 'Information accessed on the company website' (FD2.0) and it had a Cronbach reliability of 0.861.

The mean score of 1.99 and median of 2.00 indicated that respondents often used the company websites to access information about various aspects of the company and its products. The highest ranked response was 'accessing the information about the company' (E10), chosen by 69% of the respondents. The second highest was 'pricing' (2.28), where 45.5% of the respondents indicated they often used the website to access this information. Third in rank was 'competitions' with a mean of 2.22, and 47.0% indicating that they sometimes accessed it for competitions. 'Product satisfaction' (E7) was next with a mean of 2.21, and 48.0% indicating they sometimes accessed the company website for this information. The information which was least sought was E16 'organisational hierarchy', with a mean of 1.66 and 'year plan' (E19), with a mean of 1.62.

Section F contained a single question, which asked respondents whether they followed brands online. 'Yes' was coded 1 and 'no' was coded 2. The data indicates that 163 or 81.9% of the respondents said 'yes' to the item, while only 36 (18.1%) said 'no'.

Section G contained 20 items asking a response about following a brand online, measured on a four point scale where 1 indicated 'strongly agree' and 4 was for 'strongly disagree'. The PCA procedure using Oblimin rotation had a KMO of 0.830, and Bartlett's sphericity of  $p < 0.000$  indicated that such a factor analytic procedure was plausible. The six first-order factors explained 64.4% of the variance present. A second-order factor analysis, which used the same criteria, indicated one second order factor only. It was named 'Reasons for following brands online' (FG2.0), and had a Cronbach reliability coefficient of 0.867.

The mean of 2.97 and median of 3.0 indicated that the 163 respondents agreed with the reasons provided for following the brands online. Any mean score above 2.50 would probably indicate 'partial agreement' to 'agreement' with the items. When surveying the mean scores in section G, G4, 'They inform me about new products', obtained the highest mean score (2.81); respondents thus agreed that this was the main reason why they followed brands online. G5 'To keep up to date with the latest products' (2.79) was second in mean rank and G11 'Good customer service' with a

mean of 2.67 was third. This was followed by G13 (2.61) where the reason was that they had 'informative and entertaining content'.

The fifth highest mean score with a mean of 2.60 was obtained by item G3, dealing with 'providing competitions online'. Item G1, with a mean of 2.57, was because 'the company constantly updated their social media pages', while G2 (with 2.56) gave the 'running of different promotions' as a reason for following brands online. Item G15 had the lowest mean score, namely 2.21. Item G16 also dealt with ethical issues as it asked if the companies were 'honest at all times'. A mean of 2.21 for this item indicates 'partial disagreement', tending to 'disagreement'. Respondents are thus possibly concerned about the ethical issues of following brands online, and companies that make use of brand promotion or advertising online should take note of this.

Section H of the questionnaire probed possible reasons as to why individuals stopped following brands online. The PCA procedure followed by Varimax rotation resulted in one factor only. It was named 'Reasons why I stopped following brands online' (FH1.0), and contained seven items which explained 50.82% of the variance present, indicating high correlation ( $r=0.71$ ) between items. It had a Cronbach reliability coefficient of 0.837.

The mean score of 2.78 and median of 2.86 indicate that the respondents tended towards agreeing with the reasons presented in the factor. All mean scores were over 2.50, indicating that respondents tended to agree with all the reasons provided. However, they agreed most strongly with item H4, which had 'excessive communication' as reason for stopping following brands online. The mean scores of the seven items, their standard deviations and mean rank are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: The mean scores, standard deviations and mean ranks of items in the factor FH1.0**

The mean of 2.0 and median of 2.11 indicate that the respondents sometimes involved themselves with the activities regarding brands during social networking. The items with the 10 highest mean scores is given in Table 4.

**Table 4: The 10 items with the highest mean scores in the factor 'Participating in activities with brands during social networking' (FI2.0)**

The data in Table 4 shows that respondents sometimes engaged with brands with respect to the 10 listed activities during social networking. As more and more Millennial consumers are using online communication to engage with brands, its impact on companies has become stronger since information can be disseminated quickly. 'Viewing brand related pictures' (I1) was rated the highest. Item I.11 had the lowest mean score of 1.70, indicating that respondents probably only engaged occasionally with giving advice on 'how to improve a product'. This could possibly indicate good social behaviour on the part of respondents as criticising online is possibly seen as a contentious issue.

### **Online communication and reputational factors**

Section J contained 21 items, which probed the perceptions of respondents about online reputation management. The items were presented on a four-point scale where 1 was 'strongly disagree' and 4 was 'strongly agree'. The KMO value of 0.812 with Bartlett's sphericity of  $p < 0.000$  indicated that factor analysis would result in a more parsimonious grouping into factors. All items had communalities greater than 0.50. Hence the PCA with Varimax rotation resulted in six first-order factors which explained 60.85% of the variance present. A second-order procedure using the same criteria resulted in one factor only, which was named 'Online reputation management' (FJ2.0). It explained 44.3% of the variance present and had a Cronbach reliability coefficient of 0.842. Respondents thus agreed with the aspects related to online reputation management. The 11 items with the highest mean scores obtained are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5: The 11 items with the highest mean scores in the factor 'It matters to me' (FI2.0)**

The data in Table 5 shows that Item J10, 'If the brand advertises online' had the highest mean score (3.32). Ninety one percent (91.0%) of the respondents indicated that they 'agreed' and 'strongly agreed' that it mattered to them that the brand advertised online. Items J7 'If the company responds promptly to complaints online' with a mean of 3.29, and item J9 'If the brand updates online content regularly' with a mean of 3.26, were also ranked highly.

However, the item with the lowest mean of 2.64 was J19, 'It matters to me if a brand deletes negative comments from their social media page', indicating partial disagreement with the item. There were 38.5% of the respondents who 'disagreed' and 'strongly disagreed' with this item. Nevertheless, one would also expect a difference between respondents who indicated that they do follow brands online and those who indicated that they do not follow brands online with respect to this item, namely if a brand 'deletes negative comments from their social media page'. The results of the independent groups t-test indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the 'yes' and 'no' respondents regarding item J19 [ $t(197) = 1.983$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $r = 0.1$ ], thus confirming that those who follow brands online agree more strongly that it mattered to them whether 'brands deleted negative comments from their social media page'.

### **Inferential analysis for significant differences between independent groups**

As factors (dependent variables) in Subsections F, D and J applied to all respondents, they were analysed first to see if possible significant associations were present with the independent variables in Section A.

No statistically significant differences could be found between the gender groups with respect to factors F, D or J. With respect to the three age groups serving as independent variables, no statistically significant differences could be found.

Item F asked whether the respondents followed brands online. There were two categories of response, namely 1 (yes) or 2 (no).

**Table 6: The mean scores and standard deviations for factors FD2.0, FE2.0, FI2.0 and FJ2.0 with respect to whether brands were followed online**

\*\* = Statistically significant at the 1% level ( $p < 0.01$ )

Effect size – 0.1 to 0.29 = small; 0.30 – 0.49 = moderate; 0.50 + = large

The data in Table 6 indicates that in all four factors involved, the respondents who confirmed that they followed brands online, had higher mean scores than those who did not.

#### **Multiple regression using 'online reputation management' (FJ2.0) as the outcome variable**

As all respondents had to answer Subsections D, E, H, I and J, this researcher investigated which of these predicting factors would serve as the best predictor for 'online reputation management' (FJ2.0). The multiple regression procedure in SPSS 23.0 was utilised for this. The appropriate equation for this would be:  $(FJ2.0) = \text{constant} + \beta_1 (FD2.0) + \beta_2 (FE2.0) + \beta_3 (FI2.0)$ , where FJ2.0 represented online reputation management (the outcome) and the Beta coefficients ( $\beta$ ) were the values obtained from the multiple regression for each of the predictors (FD2, FE2 and FI2).

The appropriate model had the following significant values:  $F(3,196) = 19.79$ ;  $p < 0.0005$ ; Durbin-Watson = 1.785. The model also indicated that only FE2.0 and FI2.0 were significant predictors of online reputation management (FJ2.0). The best predictor was FE2.0 ( $\beta = +0.283$ ) followed by FI2.0 ( $\beta = +0.273$ ). Hence aspects on the company website such as social media pages, pricing, competitions, prompt response, regular online brand updates, engaging in dialogue with customers, online advertisements and trust are important aspects in predicting online reputation management.

## DISCUSSION

Online sources are the tools most frequently used by the respondents when accessing information about brands. Young people aged 18-30 rely the most on online platforms for brand communication. This indicates that from the perspective of brands, when communicating with older consumers, traditional channels are still very relevant. The wide use and the appeal of social media among Millennials in the Vaal region, which corresponds with worldwide trends, indicates that organisations need to pay close attention about what and how they communicate brand-related content online.

Facebook is the leading social media platform preferred by Millennials in the Vaal region to cater for their communication needs but it is also a global leader, which is in line with the global social media use tendencies (Smith and Caruso 2010). As websites are one of the most popular organisational online communication tools, it was important to establish how Millennials in the Vaal region use company websites. Sixty nine per cent (69%) of the respondents indicated that they often accessed information about the company or brand from the company website. The main reasons for accessing websites listed by the respondents were to get information about pricing (45%), for competitions (67%), and 48% of the respondents indicated that they accessed information about product satisfaction (48%). The information that was least sought pertained to organisational hierarchy, the year plan, company structure, management related information, financial information and press releases.

Consequently, online communication is a platform where Millennials seek mainly product-related information, rather than information about a company in general. Based on findings from this study, Millennials in the Vaal region go to a company's website in order to establish the price of products and services, to enter competitions and to see comments and ratings about product satisfaction. The research revealed that Millennials in the Vaal region (81.9%) tend to follow their favourite brands, which means that the social media are a powerful tool for stakeholder engagement, hence companies must be aware of the reasons why stakeholders follow the brands in order to formulate precise communication strategies that address the diverse needs of customers.



At the same time, boring and not regularly updated content was cited as one of the reasons for unfollowing the brand, which suggests the power of emotional and social factors in online communication. This indicates that not only the content, but also the manner in which organisations communicate online is important. When communicating with Millennials, organisations need to utilise the characteristics of social media, such as easy availability combined with direct individual communication to create specific, relevant and up to date information (Bauer, Grether and Leach 2002, 157). The research also indicates that companies and their communication departments must be aware of factors such as excessive communication, failure to update online pages, deleting negative comments, not replying to complaints, posting irrelevant and boring content and not engaging with their customers online – all factors that lead to customers unfollowing brands online.

Factual communication about the products is one of the highest rated reasons as to why this group follows brands online. As the Millennials are a visually oriented public, viewing brand-related pictures was rated the highest, with a mean of 2.43. The respondents confirmed engagement in such activities as sharing and posting brand communication online, including brand-related videos and pictures, as well as recommending products to others, thus making them a powerful force in contributing to brand reputation.

The Reputation Institute model (2016), which facilitates measuring reputation within organisations was partially used to formulate questions related to reputation factors, in addition to other theoretical sources discussed above. Among the factors influencing reputation was product-related information and responding to complaints, which indicate the importance of customer service to brand reputation. In this study 91% of the respondents stated that it mattered to them if a brand advertised online. This is consistent with this generation's reliance on online information sources in general. That indicates that up-to-date products and information on services are the biggest factor contributing to corporate reputation among Generation Y consumers in the Vaal region. Another highly ranked element was brand engagement in dialogue with its customers, which indicates that the effort that companies put into consumer

engagement through dialogue results in stronger corporate reputation in the view of Millennials.

On the other hand, the factors inherently related to the nature of social media, such as interactivity, timeliness and visual appeal, were also important factors influencing reputation. In addition, it was established that factors such as being environmentally friendly and treating employees fairly were also important to the Millennials. Financial performance and management information, however, were not a priority for the Millennials. Therefore companies must ensure that public relations practitioners who manage their social media pages are aware of the expectations and online communication needs of consumers in order to build a good reputation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study indicated that online communication is important for organisations communicating with Millennials for three main reasons: Firstly, because the Millennials rely on online communication for information about brands; secondly, they also use online communication to engage with brands, and finally, because online communication affects organisational reputation among the Millennials. Organisations should ensure that the communication practitioners have the necessary expertise and knowledge to manage the organisation's communication strategy; that includes their online communication which, if not handled properly, can negatively affect their brand reputation.

This study looked at the characteristic online brand engagement and the online communication factors that influence the perception of corporate reputation among Millennials in the Vaal region. It is recommended that a similar study in other parts of South Africa be conducted in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of other factors that influence the South African Millennials' perceptions of brand reputation.

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