

Sustainable internal communication and digital trends amidst an energy crisis: can a middle ground be found in South Africa?

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the impact of current trends like the development of digital communication channels and a greater focus on sustainability, together with external pressures such as a growing electricity crisis on how internal communication is practiced, by using South African internal communication as context.

Design/methodology/approach – Two rounds of qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior internal communication practitioners and consultants to provide a robust view of the research problem.

Findings – It was found that external pressures and trends were viewed as more important than incorporating the broader definition of sustainability into the practice of internal communication. It became clear that internal communication must negotiate seemingly opposing demands like moving to digital communication, while facing electricity shortages and balancing economic pressures with stakeholder inclusion in messages. The findings suggest that internal communication cement organisational survival but should embody the environmental and social elements of sustainability.

Originality/value – The study contributes new insights to the importance of internal communication during crisis times, like the energy crisis in this study. Internal communication should embody the wider sustainability discussion during periods when challenging external forces are at work.

Keywords Digital communication channels, Energy crisis, Internal communication, Internal communication channels, South Africa, Sustainability

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Organisations have recently increasingly been affected by various forces that both challenge and highlight the need for internal communication. It is acknowledged that internal communication makes significant contributions to organisational success, organisational survival and organisations' external environment (Tkalac Verčić and Pološki Vokić, 2017). However, trends such as the development of digital communication channels and a greater

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focus on sustainability, together with external pressures, like a growing electricity crisis, have all contributed to internal communication, attempting to weather the perfect storm.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the workplace by creating an unstable environment that threatened organisations' viability and survival (Wade and Bjerkan, 2020). Within this setting and the resulting dispersed "work-from-home" policies, internal communication became central to organisational continuity during the pandemic (Li *et al.*, 2021; Sun *et al.*, 2021). Organisations had to adjust fundamentally the way they communicated with their internal stakeholders, which resulted in a greater reliance on digital, online (web-based activities), electronic and virtual platforms (Santoso *et al.*, 2022).

Yet the development and continual modification of digital communication technologies (Tkalac Verčić and Špoljarić, 2020; Tkalac Verčić *et al.*, 2024) helped turn the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis into opportunities (Camilleri, 2021). Unfortunately, each phase of technological advancement also posed further unexpected challenges to internal communication (Sutton *et al.*, 2022). The International Energy Agency (2023) argues that the recovery after the pandemic, together with other factors, has now led to a global energy crisis. The argument is made that all fossil fuels are involved in the crisis, with a particular impact on electricity delivery. The crisis articulates differently in various countries with some facing higher electricity prices, while others are experiencing gaps in electricity services. Nevertheless, the growing need for electronic internal communication channels is severely impacted by this pressure.

Given the above, internal communication should reflect both an organisation's sustainability agenda within its own operations and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2023b) as part of that organisation's responsible citizenship. Therefore, sustainable internal communication (not communicating about sustainability) is the next challenge for South African organisations. The interpretation of sustainability for the purposes of this study includes not only environmental but also further aspects such as social sustainability (Jarolimek and Weder, 2017; Kim and Ji, 2017; Rasche *et al.*, 2017), where internal communication strategically forms part of, and contributes to, integrated communication for the conceptual framework of sustainability in organisations and wider society (Weder, 2022).

The aim of this study was therefore to consider the interplay of, and solutions to, the impact of digital and sustainability trends and external pressures like the electricity crisis on internal communication. The context for the study is the South African environment, which offers an extreme example of how these elements can affect internal communication.

1.1 The South African background to the study

External pressures during a crisis could severely impact organisational health, employee well-being and organisation–employee relationships as internal communication becomes central to organisational survival (Santoso *et al.*, 2022). A form of external pressure on internal communication is electricity delivery, which is severely disrupted in South Africa. The unsustainable financial and infrastructural situation of Eskom, the South African national electricity utility, results in a variable supply of power to the entire country. This necessitates *load shedding*, a blackout schedule during which the available electricity between consumers on a geographical basis is rotated to prevent the entire power grid from collapsing. A daily schedule is published with stages of blackouts for each region or city in the country. The energy crisis necessitates a constant fluctuation between stage-4 and stage-6 load shedding, which means various iterations of blackouts of four to six hours at a time, with at times a brief period of only 90 min of electricity supply between outages (Crisis24, 2023; Eskom, 2024).

The consequences of load shedding on South African businesses are dire. The daily blackouts have crippled the already struggling economy, halted business operations, pushed the country into another recession and ceased foreign investor interest, which leave organisations fighting to survive. This in turn puts pressure on both the employees and the organisations. Some of the tangible negative consequences of load shedding include the following (BusinessTech, 2023; Mangara and Mutsaa, 2023):

- (1) Loss of productivity and staff performance for various reasons, for example, electronic work that is lost, inability to conduct online meetings, traffic congestion affecting work travel and delayed deliveries.
- (2) Loss of income due to stores being forced to close during blackouts and customers being unable to pay for products and services as most point-of-sale systems need electricity and WiFi to function. Automated teller machines (ATMs) for cash withdrawal are also down during load shedding.
- (3) Compromised security, which leads to increased theft and firewall shutdowns, leaving businesses vulnerable to online attacks.
- (4) A need for increased investment in electricity substitutes, but many businesses cannot afford to buy a generator or the fuel needed to run a large-scale diesel generator for four to six hours at a time, given that fuel prices in South Africa are at an all-time high. The cost easily runs into millions of dollars a year for large organisations. Other options to maintain standard operating levels, like installing solar or inverter batteries, are not affordable for most South African companies.

Although most influences take place at the macro and meso level of the organisation, the electricity challenges also affect the micro level of the organisation and employees on a personal level (see Voci and Karmasin, 2024). For instance, unemployment has increased (Statistics South Africa, 2024), and the lack of electricity has social and health consequences – for e.g. outbreaks of cholera, as water sanitation services cannot run without electricity (Mangara and Mutsaa, 2023).

The effect of electricity delivery on internal communication cannot be denied. Besides the fact that devices used for internal communication are powered by electricity, WiFi and Internet access also rely on power supplies to operate. Mobile networks are similarly affected (Mulonda, 2023). A lack of electricity therefore limits internal communication by disrupting the digital and online channels that are used for internal communication on a daily basis – especially in the “new normal” setting (De Souza *et al.*, 2022) – for instance, electronic mail (email), the various online meeting platforms, the Intranet and internal social media platforms, to name a few, seem to have become almost obsolete.

It could be argued that a return to more traditional communication mediums, such as print, might offer a solution to this problem. However, some of these media pose a sustainability challenge for organisations, because businesses are obliged to screen their environmental impact on nature and society. For internal communication, as a business function to stay viable, it needs to reflect organisations’ and the United Nations’ SDGs and sustainability agenda in its operations.

Besides the impact of digital and sustainability trends and external pressures like the electricity crisis, internal communication sent through the correct channels remains one of the most prominent aspects for organisational success and survival (Smith *et al.*, 2018; Tkalcac Verčić and Spoljarić, 2020) and underpins organisational effectiveness and sustainability (Lee *et al.*, 2021). With the impact of global challenges on organisations increasing, the role of internal communication is paramount.

However, it seems that most internal communication scholars either focus on (a) internal communication and channels, (b) the impact of external pressures (or crises) on internal communication or (c) internal communication *for* or *about* sustainability. No research has been found that explores the interplay between these aspects. Hence, this paper aims to understand the impact of developing digital communication channels, focusing on sustainability and external pressures, such as the electricity crisis on internal organisational communication practices, by using South African internal communication as context.

2. Literature review

Research on the trends in the development of digital communication channels and a greater focus on sustainability will now be explored.

2.1 Digital internal communication channels

Internal communication in organisations focuses on stimulating employees, managing change, gaining internal stakeholder engagement and commitment, supporting a healthy work environment where employees can share knowledge and generate ideas and involving internal stakeholders in the execution of strategic goals (Ruck *et al.*, 2017; Tkalac Verčič, 2019). However, to accomplish this, internal communication channels must be managed efficiently.

Verčič *et al.* (2015) point out that new technology exerts a strong influence on the various aspects of an organisation's communication and makes a significant contribution to excellent corporate and internal communication. Furthermore, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the "new normal" necessitates digital internal communication channels, for e.g. interactive video conferences and internal social media platforms (Bojadjiev and Vaneva, 2021, p. 240). These digital channels have become increasingly popular for internal communication (Wade and Bjerkan, 2020). It also seems that there is little difference in access to digital internal communication between the levels of staff members in first-world countries. Andersson *et al.* (2023) found in their study of a Swedish case study that the increased use of digital internal media allows coworkers to access the same information as managers, and Sisko Maarit Lipiäinen *et al.* (2014) mentioned in their research on a Finnish case study that blue-collar workers have similar access to new internal communication tools as white-collar workers. In contrast, Sutton *et al.* (2022) found that this is not the case in the developing world.

Ewing *et al.* (2019) highlight other challenges of digital communication by mentioning that many organisations are still struggling to take advantage of the wide range of new technological platforms at their disposal and exploit them to their full potential. Organisations often do not utilise the multitude of available communication devices and mediums strategically and efficiently, which leads to further challenges for internal communication. For example, technology, on the one hand, has made it easier to distribute communications on a large scale among internal stakeholders (O'Sullivan and Carr, 2017). On the other hand, it can also lead to information overload if not used purposefully (Delpont, 2020). The overload of information can, in turn, lead to disengagement among internal stakeholders.

Research on internal communication channels has focused on the effectiveness of communication channels (Men, 2014, 2015; Tkalac Verčič, 2019), channel preferences (Friedl and Tkalac Verčič, 2011; Prinsloo, 2018), the relationship between the choice of internal communication channels and communication satisfaction (Smith *et al.*, 2018; Tkalac Verčič and Špoljarić, 2020), strategic channel selection for different communication outcomes (Sommerfeldt *et al.*, 2019), Internet-enabled technologies (for instance social media platforms)

as channels to engage various stakeholders (Avidar *et al.*, 2015; Kent and Taylor, 2016; Kinsky *et al.*, 2015) and digital media for crisis communication (Austin and Jin, 2017; Liu *et al.*, 2011; Xu, 2020).

Research on the use of internal communication channels – facing the trends and challenges mentioned above – is limited, especially when adding the growing importance of the sustainability discussions.

2.2 Internal communication and sustainability

A distinction should be made between communication *about* sustainability and communication *for* sustainability. Communication *about* sustainability is mostly where organisations communicate about their corporate social responsibility (CSR) and social sustainability, while communication *for* sustainability is where communication is used to reach sustainability goals and to adapt to sustainable practices (Genc, 2017; Weder *et al.*, 2019). Many organisations view sustainable internal communication as a method to encourage employees to adapt to sustainable behaviours, reduce their environmental impact and contribute to the achievement of the company’s sustainability goals. Within these views, it could be argued that in order to be sustainable, internal communication should be conducted digitally and thereby reduce its carbon footprint. However, sustainability should be viewed as a much broader concept.

The Brundtland report of 1987 (United Nations, 2007) provides the commonly accepted definition for *sustainability*: “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. Another definition states that sustainability is “the ability of a system (an individual, a group, an organisation, society or the planet) to maintain continuity over time” (BledCom, 2022), which implies that society must use no more of a resource than can be regenerated (Aras and Crowther, 2012). These definitions show a deep concern for the environment.

However, the sustainability agenda suggests a wider definition than just environmental impact: the business community suggests environmental, social and governance (ESG) criteria for sustainability (United Nations, 2023a). From a corporate perspective, it seems that the main focus of sustainability is economic, social and environmental.

The focus of some communication sustainability studies is on CSR, but it also extends to social sustainability (Jarolimek and Weder, 2017; Kim and Ji, 2017; Rasche *et al.*, 2017) and reporting on sustainability (communicating *about* sustainability) (Chaudhuri and Jayarem, 2018; Šimunović *et al.*, 2024). Broadening the scope of sustainability to both environmental and social sustainability is still somewhat limited.

Weder’s (2022) study is closer to the view of sustainability in internal communication used in the present research study. It conceptualises communicating *for* sustainability by exploring strategic problematisation as a framework for sustainability. For the purposes of this study, it is expected that internal communication should *embody* sustainability. Masuku (2022) describes the complexity of this task by stating, “Sustainability confronts managers with situations in which they need to address multiple desirables concurrently while meeting controversial economic, environmental and social outcomes”.

Comparing the guidelines from the United Nations’ 17 SDGs and the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, insights can be gained into how such sustainability applies to internal communication, and the following can be deduced. First, internal communication should not negatively impact the environment or the organisation’s finances. Second, innovation should be used to adapt to environmental changes in order to ensure organisational survival to enhance societal resilience. Third, internal communication should balance individual stakeholder needs with communal stakeholder needs. Fourth, internal communication should encourage the use of local or indigenous communication methods in

its efforts. Internal communication should therefore ensure a genuine effort to balance environmental, social and financial sustainability by enhancing social protection, combating poverty and promoting social justice. This will embody sustainability in its broadest sense in internal communication.

Given the context and literature, our study was guided by the following **research question**: *To what extent do digital communication channel trends and a greater focus on sustainability, together with external crisis pressures, like an electricity crisis, impact internal communication practices?*

This study investigated the research question using qualitative, semi-structured interviews as the research method.

3. Method

This interpretivist study followed a qualitative research approach, which aimed to understand and describe people's perceptions, opinions and behaviour within a social context (Du Plooy, 2009; Moser and Korstjens, 2018). A qualitative research approach was deemed suitable for this study since it offers data that investigate the dynamic nature of participants' perspectives, considerations and communication experiences during periods of challenges (Babbie and Mouton, 2001; Du Plooy, 2009).

Participants consisted of two categories that were purposefully selected as a known-group sample. The first group of participants included ten senior internal communication practitioners who managed internal communication at organisations that were among the Top 500 listed companies in South Africa. These practitioners were picked because they had first-hand knowledge of and experience with how internal communication was managed in their respective organisations. The organisations they worked for represented a wide range of industries.

Eight consultants working in South Africa's internal communication management profession made up the second group. They were seasoned communication professionals who had received international recognition from bodies such as the International Association for Business Communicators (IABC) and the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) for their work in the field of internal communication. These consultants were included in the research because of their broad and varied perspectives on internal communication, based on the organisations for which they provided consulting services.

A total of 18 interviews were conducted. Data saturation was achieved at 18 interviews, as the information from respondents was repeating and no further new information was added by respondents (Du Plooy, 2009; Moser and Korstjens, 2018). The interviews covered key topics that are relevant to the study, including the unique internal communication challenges that practitioners face in the South African environment, the challenges that the electricity crisis poses for internal communication, internal communication channels and digital trends.

Some examples of the main questions posed in the interview schedule were as follows: What do you think are the latest trends in internal communication in South Africa? Do you think it is the same globally or do South African organisations differ? Why? What unique South African challenges do you experience that influence the internal communication environment? Can you please provide examples? To what extent do you think South African organisations are good at adapting to possible new internal communication challenges and crises? Which channels do you mostly use for internal communication? To what extent has this changed from what you used previously?

Follow-up interviews were conducted with participants to gain further insight and understanding of the role that the abovementioned topics have on sustainability, specifically for the internal communication context in South Africa. During the follow-up interviews, examples of questions such as the following were posed: How would you describe

sustainable communication in the internal context? To what extent have internal communication practices changed in your organisation to align with the United Nations' SDGs and the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development? Do you think it should be done differently? How? To what extent do the unique South African challenges that you experience in the internal communication environment impact your role as a communication practitioner to achieve sustainability?

The interview schedules were not limited to these questions; follow-up questions were often asked based on the participants' responses, and the participants were able, when answering open-ended questions, to steer the conversation in the direction they saw fit. Therefore, the conversation was often directed by the participants' responses (see [Babbie and Mouton, 2001](#)).

Even though some of the participants were not available again, as is typical with follow-up interviews, the respondents who did participate still represented both categories (practitioners and consultants). In this research, emphasis was placed on the consistency of the opinions from the same set of participants ([Caruana et al., 2015](#)). In the second round of interviews, nine interviews were realised with four practitioners and five consultants (see [Table 1](#)).

Invitations to participate in the interviews were e-mailed to all participants in both rounds of interviews. The interviews took place via Zoom on a scheduled date and time convenient for the participants. Allowing for online interviews assisted in securing the interviews in the

| Round 1 interviews | Participants | Follow-up interviews |
|--------------------|--|----------------------|
| Participant 1 | Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the education and training sector | No |
| Participant 2 | Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the health and beauty sector | No |
| Participant 3 | Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the hotels and resorts sector | Yes |
| Participant 4 | Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the dairy production sector | Yes |
| Participant 5 | Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the mining sector | No |
| Participant 6 | Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the food processing sector | No |
| Participant 7 | Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the agriculture sector | Yes |
| Participant 8 | Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the education and training sector | Yes |
| Participant 9 | Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the diversified retailing sector | No |
| Participant 10 | Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the investment and asset management sector | No |
| Participant 11 | Consultant within a variety of business sectors and industries | Yes |
| Participant 12 | Consultant within a variety of business sectors and industries | Yes |
| Participant 13 | Consultant within a variety of business sectors and industries | Yes |
| Participant 14 | Consultant in the forestry sector | Yes |
| Participant 15 | Consultant in the diversified retailing sector | No |
| Participant 16 | Consultant in consumer goods and the automotive industry | No |
| Participant 17 | Consultant in the mining sector | No |
| Participant 18 | Consultant within a variety of business sectors and industries | Yes |

Source(s): Created by the authors

Table 1.
Overview of
participants

busy schedules of the interviewees, as it meant more flexibility for the participants and less time and expenses spent on travel. The researchers did keep in mind that online meetings can have disadvantages, like experiencing technical difficulties and rendering conversations more formal as opposed to a more spontaneous face-to-face interview. Allowances were made at the start of the interviews to put interviewees at ease.

Informed consent was obtained before the interviews commenced. Participation was voluntary, and both the organisations' and participants' privacy were respected by de-identifying and anonymising the data. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 min and was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed by both authors of the study using qualitative content analysis (see [Babbie and Mouton, 2001](#)). Due to the exploratory nature of the research, the data were inductively analysed "to let the data speak" ([Du Plooy, 2009](#), p. 226). The raw data were condensed into three overarching themes, based on the researchers' interpretation. The findings below are presented in the three themes relevant to this study, namely (1) digital internal communication challenges and trends, (2) the impact of the energy crisis on internal communication and (3) internal communication sustainability challenges during the energy crisis. The authors discussed and compared our interpretation of the findings with each other to improve the validity of the qualitative approach ([Lindlof and Taylor, 2019](#)).

4. Findings

The findings below describe how participants perceived the impact of digital and sustainability trends and external pressures such as the electricity crisis on internal communication practices in corporate South Africa to answer the research question: To what extent do digital communication channel trends and a greater focus on sustainability, together with external crisis pressures, like an electricity crisis, impact internal communication practices?

4.1 Several digital internal communication challenges and trends in the South African corporate environment

The main findings on internal communication channels showed, first, that interviewees viewed the volatile and diverse South African environment as the major driver of how internal communication channels were utilised. Second, it was evident that the internal communication channels used in this context mostly reflected set-organisation-determined routes.

South African organisations reportedly struggled to implement and adopt new digital media channels, in contrast with perceived global trends. The participants noted that "we [South African organisations] are definitely behind", especially with "things like the adoption and use of social media" and "new media", and South Africa "takes longer to adopt and use new platforms". Participants pointed out that other countries had faster WiFi and Internet speeds and that internal stakeholders in the corporate environment sometimes "still struggle with bandwidth". Therefore, they felt that "we are far behind the rest of the world in terms of technology" and that this affected the quality of internal communication.

The reason for the slow uptake of digital media was explained as follows: "We are struggling to use new technology to help with internal communication. It is sometimes a budget issue, sometimes an IT issue and sometimes a resource and capacity issue to get new things implemented." In addition, the lack of free WiFi in the workplace, access to smartphones, poor infrastructure and unequal levels of training and literacy further contributed to the push against digital media. For instance, in some cases, only office-based employees had access to digital internal communication. As one practitioner explained, "[N]ot all employees have access to e-mails and electronic communications".

Furthermore, digital communication is hindered by the fact that not all employees own smartphones or have access to the usual applications (apps) or social media on their mobile telephones. A participant described the challenge as follows: “From an internal communication perspective, we work on dependencies”, which refers to the varying levels of economic stability, literacy and WiFi access employees have. Another interviewee explained, “We have high levels of inconsistency when it comes to education, language, access to medical care, transport, schools, all those types of things that make South Africa a much more complex place to communicate.”

The fact that South Africa also has 12 official languages was seen to add to digital communication challenges. The variety of languages is also a reason why social media use as an internal communication channel within organisations is withheld. Participants indicated that they currently needed to translate large quantities of internal communication information, as most of the operational employees spoke African languages, for example, Sepedi, isiZulu, isiXhosa or Setswana. Participants admitted that when they researched a social media platform for internal communication, they had “not yet worked out how to run a social media system in multiple languages– it will still need some effort and thinking”. Translating into languages other than English as a business language is a challenge that includes human resources, capacity and financial resources.

A further challenge is that communication channels are added to solve communication-related issues. As one interviewee stated, “From the large variety of channels that are available for internal communication, people are starting to use many more channels”. From the participants’ comments, it can be deduced that there is a tendency to “add an extra channel if the internal communication is not going well”. Interviewees also indicated that participants preferred face-to-face channels. The participants argued that “face-to-face surpasses all other communication” and justified that “all other ways of communicating” should only be seen as a “reference” to support “face-to-face”.

4.2 The impact of the energy crisis on internal communication

The participants highlighted the “deep need to embrace digital channels”. They explained that many “companies have already been on that journey for some time before, but the pandemic simply accelerated the need to be able to focus on digital” and the “ways of doing things digitally in general”. It seemed that the interviewees acknowledged fundamental changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a bigger need to use digital internal communication channels.

Nevertheless, the findings during the electricity crisis report that South African organisations are struggling to implement and adopt new technology trends. The internal communication practitioners and consultants interviewed highlighted the “usual challenges” they face, for instance, the fact that most organisations in different industries experienced a lack of free WiFi in the workplace, access to smartphones and unequal levels in training and literacy, over and above the electricity outages with which they had to deal. This finding highlights the results of [Assefa et al. \(2021\)](#) that African countries, including South Africa, still lagged behind the rest of the world in digital technology accessibility, use, infrastructure and skills.

Infrastructure problems like the electricity supply in South Africa (and other issues such as human capital development also highlighted in the present study) are reported to be the most persistent challenges that prevented many African countries from enjoying the potential benefits of digital technologies ([Assefa et al., 2021](#); [Sutton et al., 2022](#)). Even with the declining cost of technologies, most of these devices are still out of reach for many South African citizens ([International Telecommunication Union, 2021](#)).

Even though the pandemic necessitated a drastic increase in employees' use of digital and technological communication channels, especially during lockdown where they had to work from home, many employees in South Africa could not do so because of a lack of devices and access to the Internet at home. Organisations had to sponsor Internet data and devices during the pandemic in order to communicate with their employees internally. A participant explained, "[W]hat we've done, and I think this is what may have helped slightly, we have given data [. . .] 30 gigabytes of data for them to use on their mobile devices per month [. . .] for staff members who could not afford it. So, everybody had data, and then we have given employees devices".

However, even though they now have data and devices, the infrastructure in South Africa prevents many people from having electricity at home, and they therefore could still not receive emails or WhatsApp messages during lockdown or afterwards. Working from home is not an option for most South Africans, since they only have electricity at work (to charge their mobile telephones and devices or receive online communication). Now, with the current energy crisis, the infrastructure issues employees experience are not only at home but also at work, as they still cannot use technology and digital channels during load shedding.

4.3 Internal communication sustainability challenges during the energy crisis

A participant explained that organisations and internal communication practitioners should be flexible in this uncertain environment to contribute to economic and social sustainability "in the long run". Furthermore, practitioners must make sure that there are available channels for different scenarios: "You need to make sure that you've got channels that can talk to staff in the normal work situation and then in an abnormal work situation." There should be channels for when "everyone is physically in the office" and also "if they are not in the office". Likewise, there should be channels to communicate with employees "when there is electricity and also during load shedding" when there are electricity interruptions – and these channels "actually [have] to sync" with one another.

With this in mind, the participants highlighted the importance of evaluating channels for internal communication to determine its sustainability. A participant specifically mentioned that the "evaluation of communication messages, content and channels becomes even more important", while another commented that "you cannot assume that channels that worked before are still useful and fulfil the needs" of employees in the current electricity crisis scenario. Even the "channels used yesterday" are not "guaranteed anymore today", and therefore "re-evaluation and testing are key in the current circumstances". A participant rightly stated, "We often assume we can just carry on, but we should actually relook all the communication. The communication needs of employees must be researched on a continuous basis [. . .] Not just a communication audit once every couple of years". Therefore, the internal communication needs of internal stakeholders should be determined on a continuous basis to adapt during times of external pressure, for example, during the electricity crisis and be sustainable.

The participants also highlighted the influence that the electricity crisis had on internal communication and on employees' well-being. "The challenge of load shedding" led to "another layer of instability and uncertainty and fear and anxiety [. . .] That is why we have to focus more on direct face-to-face communication." It seems that "more than ever" it is important that employees "see management's non-verbal communication and hear their tone", which emphasises face-to-face channels. The impact of the electricity crisis on the social sustainability of internal stakeholders, which has a direct impact on the survival and economic sustainability of the organisation, was highlighted during the interviews.

Together with face-to-face communication, "more paper-based" and "printed" channels are also used. The participants stated that "not even the most preferred channels" or

“commonly used internal communication channels”, like “emails and Intranet”, are “useful now”, because “by the time one guy gets the message after load shedding, it might be old news.” Other platforms that became a trend – “especially for operational and office staff” such as MS Teams and Zoom meetings – are obsolete during load shedding, which counters the sustainability of online meetings in a country such as South Africa where electricity is interrupted several times a day.

The above leads to the trend of moving back to traditional forms of internal communication, such as “town hall meetings” (where possible), “employee radio stations” and “print media”, which more closely resemble the stakeholder needs. Interviewees argued that even more than face-to-face opportunities, print media ensured their messages reached their internal stakeholders. It therefore provided clear goal achievement value, specifically where internal communication departments had to compete for funding.

However, the strong return to printed forms of internal communication is in opposition to the sustainability agenda. Interestingly, some interviewees mentioned that they have little concern for sustainability and prioritised it lower than the need to get their message across – “which is my job as a communication practitioner”. Furthermore, when mentioning sustainability, it would appear that the interviewees were referring mostly to the environmental element of sustainability and not to its wider application.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The study aims to explore the impact of current trends – like the development of digital communication channels and a greater focus on sustainability, together with external pressures like a growing electricity crisis – on how internal communication is practiced by using South African internal communication as context. The rich data collected during the two rounds of interviews provide a robust view of how senior internal communication practitioners and consultants perceive the trends and challenges in this volatile corporate internal environment.

From the external pressure reviewed in this study on sustainable internal communication and digital trends, it appears that the electricity crisis and the use of digital communication channels in an unstable environment received more attention from the interviewees. Sustainability, particularly the environmental part of the concept, was seen as less important. That said, the impact of the electricity crisis and digital challenges in the corporate South African environment on (*un*)sustainability was highlighted in the responses.

The energy crisis in South Africa is threatening business and economic sustainability, while the use of printed internal communication channels threatens environmental sustainability. When sustainability is understood as a genuine link between ecology and economics by enhancing social protection, combating poverty and promoting social justice, it becomes clear that sustainability in the internal organisational environment should manage resources in such a way that future generations’ needs are not jeopardised (Purnomo *et al.*, 2021). This underscores the need for practitioners to embody sustainability as part of internal communication and follow the guidelines as deduced from the United Nations’ 17 SDGs and the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The guidelines encourage an equal focus on the environment, economic elements, societal resilience, communal needs and the incorporation of local or indigenous communication.

Achieving successful internal communication within environmental challenges and trends seemed to be central to the research findings. In South African internal organisational communication, there was a preference for electronic internal communication channels, which did not reflect the circumstances of the South African context where the employees have limited access to electricity. The conclusion can be drawn that electronic internal communication solutions in this case do not include social sustainability.

Like many other countries, South Africa faced digital challenges, with some communities possessing limited access and digital illiteracy. Therefore, to move this situation to one of sustainability, some organisations gifted their employees with data and electronic devices during COVID-19. However, the electricity shortage was identified as the most persistent problem for internal communicators. The result was a strong move back to printed forms of internal communication after the pandemic. However, the return to printed channels is not in line with the sustainability agenda. The above then leads to the trend to move back to traditional forms of internal communication, like face-to-face opportunities, town hall meetings and employee radio stations. It is clear that channels that worked before are no longer as useful and do not fulfil the internal stakeholders' needs during the electricity crisis with load shedding and regular power outages. Therefore, the importance to "re-evaluate and test is key in the current circumstances" of the electricity disaster. Organisations should not ignore the specific needs and expectations of their internal stakeholders, and it is important to think about ways of adapting internal communication and its channels to internal and external influences since the employees are the core of any company.

5.1 Practical implications

There is a need to balance a concern for sustainability versus the need to get communicators' message across, with the latter regarded as more important. Given these findings, it is necessary to engage in proper stakeholder analysis and strategic communication planning that would create a full understanding of the stakeholder to enable social sustainability in communication. Understanding the factors that impact organisations and their economic stability could be incorporated, while proper consideration should also be given to environmental concerns. A robust strategic planning process could be the foundation for internal communication to embody sustainability. Consequently, internal communicators must train themselves to be able to manage this phenomenon strategically – to the benefit of the organisation and the environment – not simply to cause more good than harm. Ongoing education of communication practitioners becomes critical, especially in managing internal communication sustainably during different crisis situations. This finding is aligned with [Voci and Karmasin \(2024, p. 34\)](#), who recently argued a need for "education in the field of sustainability communication, particularly in terms of preparing future sustainability (communication) scientists".

Lessons learnt from this research could be extended to internal communication practitioners in other countries facing or potentially facing similar challenges. Some examples of other developing countries that have rolling electricity blackouts include Pakistan and India. However, the phenomenon is not limited to developing countries. Austria, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, as some examples of developed countries, have also started preparing for possible blackouts ([Evans, 2022](#); [World Population Review, 2023](#)). The emergence of an energy crisis that impacts electricity provision which, in turn, impacts on technology use in communication and that opposes technological advances could become a reality elsewhere. Therefore, this research contributes towards starting the conversation of finding a sustainable way of communicating in the context of an energy crisis, which would not only help organisations' internal communication departments to be more business-relevant but also help them contribute strategically to the overall sustainability goals of organisations and embody the full definition of sustainability.

Taken as a whole, it is agreed that the impact of digital and sustainability trends, and external pressures such as the electricity crisis on internal communication have impacted the practice and brought it to an important crossroads. To ensure internal communication remains viewed as crucial to organisational survival, it needs to embrace new digital

developments without neglecting the contribution of older channels, with a clear sense of environmental and social sustainability in its application.

The findings in this study also underline that a one-size-fits-all approach is not suitable for the context of sustainable internal communication. Therefore, future studies could investigate the challenge of internal communication embodying the wider sustainability discussion during times when challenging external forces are at work.

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