

Enhancing Communication Effectiveness in Higher Education Institutions: Lessons from Walter Sisulu University

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Abstract

This study investigated the effectiveness of communication strategies within higher education institutions, focusing on Walter Sisulu University (WSU). The purpose was to assess how institutional communication practices influence student engagement, information access, and satisfaction. Grounded in systems theory, which emphasises interdependence and open communication within organisational structures, the research highlights the need for responsive and multidirectional communication channels in academic settings. A quantitative methodology was employed, utilising a structured questionnaire distributed to 156 registered students across various academic levels and faculties. Data was analysed using SPSS Version 28, and reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82. Findings reveal that while students are moderately satisfied with current communication tools—particularly Facebook, email, and noticeboards—there is significant underutilisation of platforms like newsletters and the university website. A major concern is the lack of communication about strategic direction, institutional policies, and general information, with 91% of students indicating inadequate access to such content. The study recommends adopting a modern, multi-channel communication approach that integrates traditional tools with social media and digital platforms to ensure inclusivity, consistency, and effectiveness. This research contributes to academic scholarship by offering empirical evidence on the role of communication systems in student engagement and institutional performance for higher education institutions. The study outcomes, furthermore, provide a foundation for future studies exploring the intersection of communication technology and organisational behaviour in higher education contexts.

Keywords: student communication, higher education, social media, communication strategy, communication channels and tools

1. Introduction

In an era of heightened competition and transformation within higher education, effective communication has emerged as a cornerstone for institutional performance, student engagement, and the successful implementation of academic strategies (Chirwa & Boikanyo, 2022, p. 2). Universities function as complex social systems where communication is not merely transactional but strategic, influencing internal coordination, stakeholder relationships, and service delivery. Within such systems, the quality and directionality of communication determine not only operational efficiency but also student satisfaction, institutional credibility, and adaptability in a rapidly evolving academic environment (Liaw et al., 2018: n.p.; Brinia, Selimi, Dimos & Kondea, 2022, p. 4). The systems' theoretical framework, developed by Von Bertalanffy (1969), underpins the conceptual lens of this study. It views higher education institutions (HEIs) as open systems whose survival and growth depend on dynamic interactions with their environments—social, political, technological, and economic (Umar & Danburam, 2022, p. 282). Within this framework, communication is central to feedback loops, decision-making, and the integration of academic and administrative functions (Musheke & Phiri, 2021, p. 661). Walter Sisulu University (WSU), like many HEIs, faces the challenge of managing internal communication

effectively across its merged campuses and diverse student body, especially within its Marketing, Communication and Advancement department.

Despite the increasing recognition of the strategic value of communication, a significant gap remains in knowledge regarding the actual effectiveness of institutional communication strategies from the student perspective. While institutions invest in various communication channels—ranging from emails and newsletters to social media and web portals—there is limited empirical insight into their relevance, accessibility, and impact on student understanding, engagement, and trust. Delport, 2020, p. 2) and Clemmons (2022, p. 33) add that existing literature often focuses on theoretical models or managerial perspectives, leaving a void in understanding how communication tools are perceived and used by students in practice. This study seeks to address that void. The objective of this study is to assess the effectiveness of communication strategies employed by Walter Sisulu University in reaching and engaging students, with the aim of identifying gaps, strengths, and opportunities for improvement. It specifically explores students' usage, perceptions, and satisfaction with various communication tools—ranging from traditional noticeboards and newsletters to digital platforms like Facebook and institutional websites.

To achieve this, the study adopted a quantitative research design and employed a census method to collect data from 156 student respondents through structured questionnaires. The tool included Likert-scale items and closed-ended questions covering biographical details, perceptions, and communication behaviour. The data was analysed using SPSS version 28, and the internal consistency of the instrument was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, indicating acceptable reliability (Mohammad-Rahimi et al., 2023, p. 4).

Literature Review

The study starts with a theoretical framework that examines communication in university ecosystems and is based on systems theory. The different institutional communication tools and functions that encourage participation, inclusion, and information sharing are then reviewed. Empirical trends in the use, efficacy, and satisfaction of communication tools emerge from the student responses. These results are interpreted under the presentation of findings and discussion, with reference to existing research and theoretical frameworks. Strategic improvements to communication techniques are suggested, with a focus on student-centred messaging and integrated digital platforms. The conclusion highlights the importance of matching communication systems to student needs in contemporary higher education institutions (HEIs) and summarises important findings.

Theoretical framework – Systems theory

The systems theory views problems as being solvable in their entirety, emphasising the interrelation and interactivity of the systems, their constituents, and the surroundings. Systems theories are hierarchical, dynamic, goal-oriented, and open to their surroundings and exchanges in terms of matter, energy, and information (Liu, Zhau, Zhong, Ma & Wang, 2024, p. 4). According to Musheke and Phiri (2021, p. 661), the systems theory on communication is intended to grasp human communication as a network rather than one element of the same. Hence, within the context of this research, the similarities between communication systems and systems theory are central to this research.

Higher education institutions are influenced by their social, political, and economic environments and function as open systems that receive inputs (students, finances) and produce outputs (graduates). WSU exemplifies this by using various communication channels and encouraging feedback, allowing it to thrive despite competition. It has adapted to financial challenges while maintaining strong community and government relationships. According to Umar and Danburam (2022, p 282), system theory highlights the importance of open communication for synergy, enabling institutions to effectively measure progress and adapt accordingly. Effective feedback channels help organisations monitor progress and adjust. By using systems theory in communication, universities can clearly convey directives, aiding in the timely achievement of educational goals. This approach is especially relevant to organisational communication in higher education institutions, such as Walter Sisulu University.

Types of systems and their applicability to higher education communication strategies

There are two types of systems: closed and open. Closed systems are isolated from their environment, while open systems interact freely with it, relying on these exchanges for balance. The open-systems approach, introduced by Katz & Kahn (1996), Touson, Azad, Depue, Crimmins and Long (2020, p 2) analyses how organisations respond to change by mapping input, throughput, output, and feedback cycles, which helps improve performance. The systems theory of communication highlights the interconnectedness and interdependence of components within a hierarchical structure, emphasising that communication outcomes affect overall organisational performance. Components rely on each other for functionality, emphasising holistic understanding. By contrast, the closed systems lack input-based communication, making it challenging to make informed decisions and stay updated with environmental needs (Musheke & Phiri, 2021, p. 664).

Functions of communication

Organisational communication involves the exchange and understanding of information within an organisation to influence or regulate behaviour, involving verbal, nonverbal, or written messages within the organisational context (Turyahikayo, Mugizi & Kasule, 2024, p. 2). Aline (2020, p. 11) highlights the multifaceted objectives of the communication process, including improving individual goals, executing functions, and assisting in information, persuasion, conflict reduction, and misunderstanding reduction. Institutional communication is a discipline concerned with communication and relationship management, encompassing various domains that seek to enhance institutional performance in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. Institutional communication is a management function that is deliberately and instrumentally utilised by organisations. It encompasses a planned and applied approach within the realms of management communication, organisational communication, and marketing communication (Gürses, Ozkanal, & Yazici, 2023, p. 76).

Meirinhos et al. (2023) discuss the process of organisational communication, which can be operational or motivational. It outlines four components: channels, flow, content, and climate, with channels including electronic, face-to-face, or visual media and can occur in a downward, upward, or horizontal direction. To adapt to changes in higher education in South Africa, Walter Sisulu University (WSU) must establish effective communication systems that motivate stakeholders and keep them informed about the organisation's status. As a merged institution, WSU requires a structured communication framework to facilitate information flow, which can aid in personal transformation and build confidence within the community.

Communication in higher education institutions

According to Tegegne and Wondimu (2024, p. 5), effective communication involves understanding the emotions and intentions behind information, delivering a clear message, and attentively listening to understand the other person's feelings, crucial for social interactions and establishing coherent relationships. Ibrahim (2024, p. 21) states that effective communication is crucial for successful strategy implementation, ensuring alignment among stakeholders and preventing misunderstandings, confusion, and resistance among employees, ultimately leading to successful execution. Effective communication is essential in all institutions, and appropriate channels like newsletters, billboards, web pages, and bulletins can improve communication (Mba & Maclean, 2022, p. 335). Chirwa and Boikanyo (2022, p. 2) add that effective communication is crucial for organisational success, involving the exchange of ideas, information, thoughts, and knowledge using words, gestures, or symbols at all organisational levels. Henke (2024, p. 3) affirms that university communication is a distinct form of science communication, encompassing all forms of communication within and about universities, including production, content, usage, and impact, conducted by both internal and external actors.

According to Delport (2020, p. 2), mergers in HEIs have impacted internal communication, necessitating a revisit of communication practices to effectively communicate with a diverse and fragmented community, despite often not regularly monitoring their effectiveness. Internal communication involves activities that establish and maintain relationships through various channels, including formal and informal, traditional and digital. The flow of messages can be categorised by direction, objectives, channels, and challenges. The level of internal communication determines an organisation's efficiency and plays a crucial role in change processes (Nina Hanco, Chávez Espinoza & Dueñas De La Cruz, 2023, p. 3).

Communication tools in higher education institutions

Higher education institutions must improve communication by revising core values, enhancing teaching methods, and leveraging modern tools like social media. WSU is currently developing an internal communication strategy through its Marketing, Communication and Advancement office to align with the university's vision. Additionally, Mtange (2023, p. 5) states that fostering relationships requires assessing communication practices that promote inclusion, diversity, and participation in decision-making. Effective communication in HEIs should integrate traditional, technological, and electronic channels, including oral, written, and social media. This forms part of the internal communication as a strategic management tool.

Higher education institutions, like WSU, are slow to adapt to societal changes. WSU has launched a website and Facebook page to enhance communication with students and remain relevant in the digital age. Effective internal communication is facilitated through collaboration with the ICT department and various tools. To manage operations efficiently, institutions should employ diverse communication methods—such as email, newsletters, campus radio, websites, meetings, and social networks—to keep staff, students, and stakeholders informed about strategic objectives and values.

Integrated digital and crisis communication strategies for stakeholder engagement in higher education institutions

Digital platforms provide flexibility and scalability; however, to facilitate widespread adoption, they often require training and support. Therefore, a well-structured communication plan is essential for aligning communication efforts with organisational goals and objectives. This plan details the strategies, channels, and tactics for disseminating information, engaging stakeholders, and fostering transparency and accountability (Chukwurah, Ige, Idemudia & Adebayo, 2024:59). Alharthi (2024:17) emphasises that the higher education sector faces distinct challenges that necessitate focused attention, particularly due to its diverse stakeholder landscape. This landscape comprises students, faculty, staff, alumni, governing bodies, and the community at large, each group with unique needs, expectations, and communication preferences. Consequently, universities are required to adapt their crisis communication strategies to effectively address these varied demands. The impact of digital technologies on organisational changes in HEIs, such as WSU, has been profound, especially under conditions of extreme uncertainty. WSU has experienced a merger and a restructuring, reducing its faculties from 12 to 7. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 exacerbated challenges for universities, acting as a catalyst for digital transformation. This necessitated rapid enhancements in digital teaching methods, the quality of digital educational resources, and organisational and structural adaptations (Spivakovsky, Malchykova & Yatsenko, 2024:131). In the realm of the virtual marketplace, e-service quality is defined as customers' evaluations of the efficacy of e-service delivery. Five key dimensions are identified: usability, design, information, trust, and empathy. Usability refers to the user interface's functionality and overall user experience, while design emphasises visual appeal. Information refers to the relevance of content tailored to users' needs. Trust involves the credibility of the service provider, the security of transactions, and the protection of personal data. Empathy focuses on communication practices, community engagement, and personalised service. Additionally, essential factors contributing to e-service quality include ease of use, reliability, effective support, and communication. Ease of use pertains to both external web navigation and internal site usability, while effective communication is vital in ensuring users receive clear and understandable information (Imane & Bouchra, 2024, p. 132).

2. Methodology

Using numerical data and statistical analysis, this study adopted a quantitative research design that was suitable for methodically investigating how students view institutional communication tactics. When assessing perceptions and satisfaction levels across large populations, quantitative studies offer structured frameworks that improve objectivity and precision, as stated by Zyoud, Bsharat, and Dweikat (2020:11). Targeting all third-year students at Buffalo City College, Chislehurst, a campus of Walter Sisulu University, the study used a census sampling technique. Out of the 550 participants in the sample, 156 answered the survey. A census approach is best for gathering information from the whole population of interest, removing sampling bias, and guaranteeing inclusivity in participant responses (Rawley, 2024: n.p.). A structured questionnaire utilising closed-ended and Likert scale items was employed to collect data, divided into two sections: biographical details of respondents and their opinions, usage patterns, and satisfaction levels concerning the university's communication tools, including emails, Facebook, noticeboards, newsletters, and internal websites. A census sampling technique was employed, targeting all registered third-year students, ensuring accurate data representation. This approach yields the most reliable results when effectively executed (Bell, 2022). Academic experts reviewed the questionnaire to align it with research objectives, while pre-testing involved 25 Level 3 students to improve its clarity and structure. The internal consistency reliability, measured by Cronbach's alpha, produced a score of 0.82, indicating high reliability for the scale items (Mohammad-Rahimi *et al.*, 2023, p. 4). Data analysis was conducted using Version 28 of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), with researchers applying descriptive statistics to interpret responses and present findings in various formats, including frequency tables, pie charts, bar graphs, and histograms.

The questionnaire developed for this study aimed to enhance content validity by drawing from previous literature on higher education communication strategies. Content validity, categorised as evident or logical, necessitates thorough expert evaluation to ensure clarity and representativeness, thus mitigating potential challenges (Benavides *et al.*, 2022). However, the study notes limitations, including data collection from only one campus, which may affect the findings' generalisability, and a focus on communication tools without an in-depth analysis of content quality or message timing. The distribution of communication tool use, perceived efficacy, satisfaction levels, and gaps were the main topics of the analysis.

Ethical research guidelines were followed in this study. Under FREC number 24/14/FREC, ethical clearance was received from Walter Sisulu University on May 27, 2014, and from Durban University of Technology on September 3, 2015. All participants gave their informed consent after being fully informed of their rights, which included the confidentiality of their answers and the opportunity to participate voluntarily. Participants in the study faced no risks, and data protection regulations were always strictly followed.

Presentation of Findings and Discussions

The study surveyed 156 registered students at Buffalo City College's Chislehurst campus, examining their biographical

profiles and academic distribution. The academic levels included six participants at level 1, sixty-one at level 2, seventy-one at level 3, and eighteen at level 4. In terms of the faculty, 122 students were from the Faculty of Business Sciences, while 34 students were from the Faculty of Engineering, Science, and Technology.

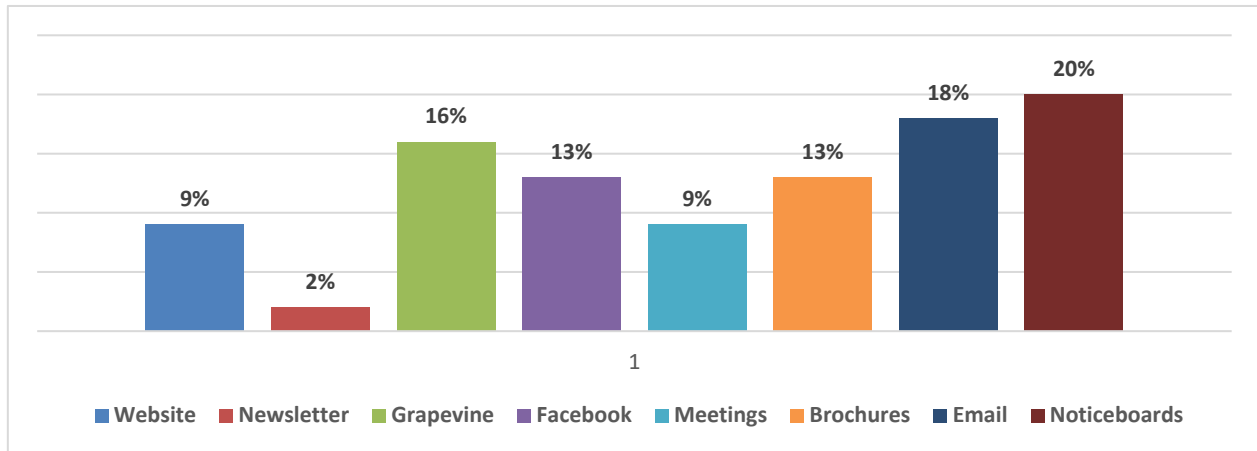


Figure 1. Frequency of communication tools used by Walter Sisulu University

Figure 1 illustrates the communication landscape at WSU, revealing email (20%) and noticeboards (18%) as the most utilised tools, followed by the grapevine (16%) and social media platforms like Facebook (13%). In contrast, newsletters (5%) and websites (13%) reflect low usage among students. This disparity highlights a tendency for students to favour more accessible and immediate communication methods over institutional offerings. Baroto and Prasetyo (2020, p. 36) assert the significance of email as a pivotal communication medium in the digital age, while Sackey, Yandoh and Sangban (2023, p. 154) note the effectiveness of noticeboards on campus. To address this, higher education institutions, such as WSU, are increasingly leveraging social media, such as Instagram, and integrating multimedia feedback systems to enhance engagement with digital-native students. Improved communication technologies are fostering community development and strengthening interactions between students and administration, which aligns with Olsen's (2025) emphasis on the importance of effective communication in institutional operations.

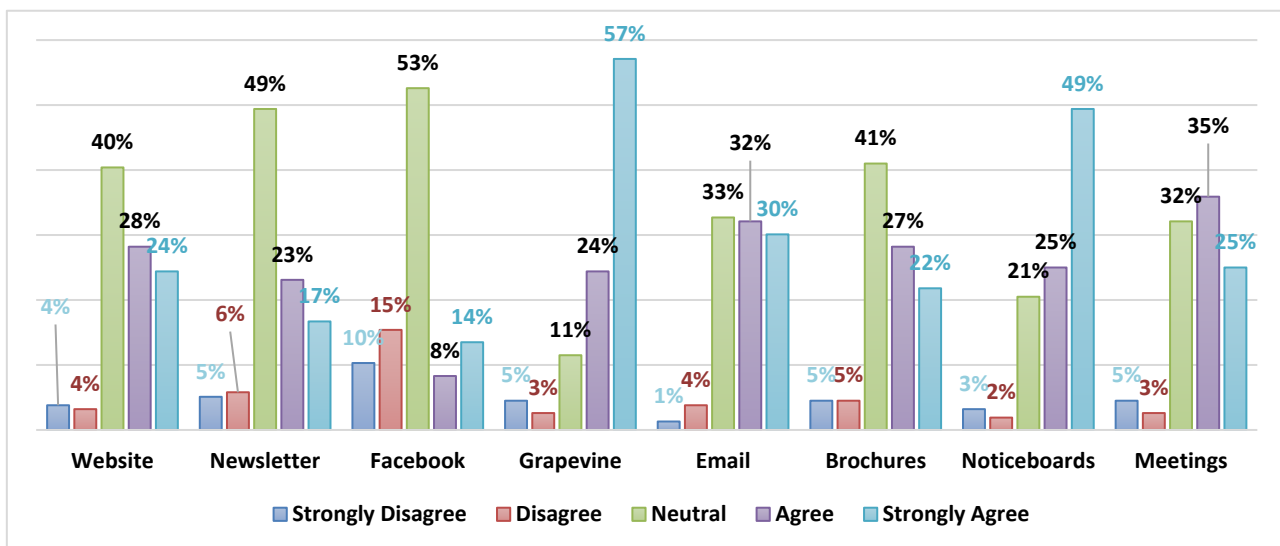


Figure 2. Frequency of communication tools used by students

The data in Figure 2 reveals that 40% of respondents maintain a neutral stance on communication tools, with 28% regularly utilising websites. A significant proportion of respondents expressed strong preference for Facebook (53%), noticeboards (49%), and grapevine communication (57%). Clemmons (2022:33) highlights the influence of higher education institutions' organisational structures on internal communication, which is crucial for effectiveness and stakeholder engagement. The dynamics of communication are shaped by factors such as industry type, organisational structure, culture, and managerial style (Mmuntle, 2022, p. 50). Despite the demonstration of students' digital literacy, there is underutilisation of formal university communication tools, such as internal websites and newsletters, was likely due to design complexities, inadequate updates, and lack of user awareness. It is essential for WSU to create

user-friendly designs and effectively promote these tools within the student community. Additionally, Meirinhos *et al.* (2023) emphasise the critical role of usability in enhancing engagement with communication tools.

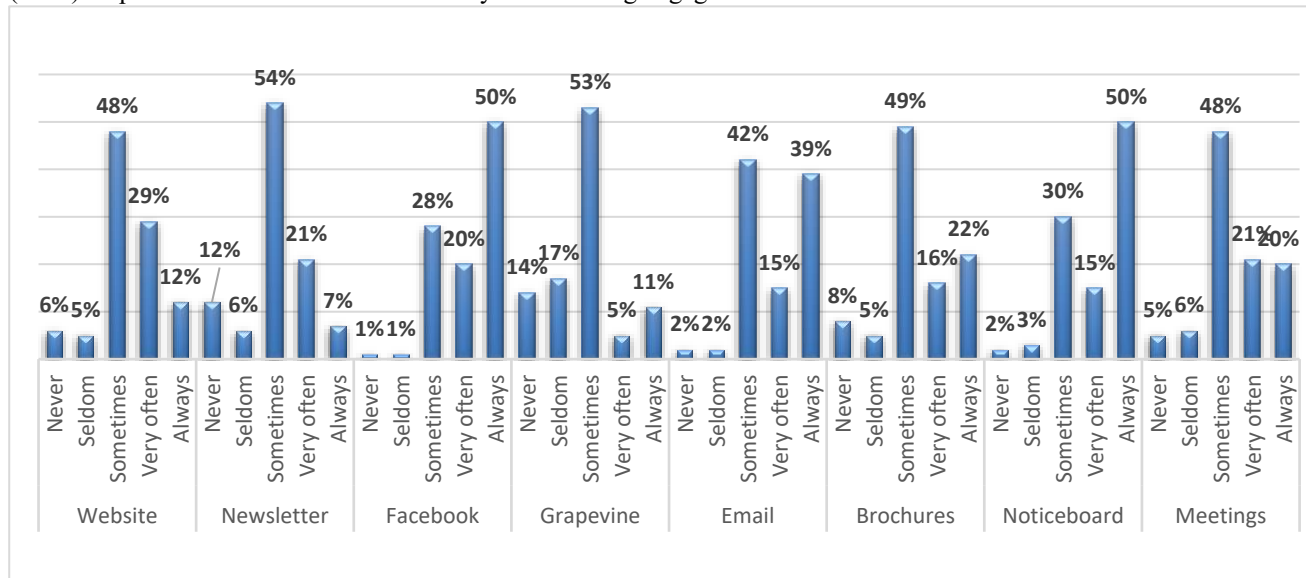


Figure 3. Frequency of use of WSU's communication tools used by students

The findings indicate that communication tools at WSU exhibit varied usage patterns among respondents. A significant proportion rarely utilises newsletters (54%) and the website (48%), while Facebook and noticeboards are similarly favoured by 50% of respondents. Notably, the website and newsletter are underused at rates of 12% and 7%, respectively. Familiarity with these tools notably impacts their usage, underscoring the necessity of effective communication channels in educational contexts. The data suggests that students' perceptions of communication tools are influenced by their familiarity with the tools. Digital communication allows universities to customise messages to cater to diverse student needs, although this demands additional resources for personalised marketing (Gillani, 2024, p. 277). Mambaja, Dondolo, and Conradie (2023, p. 71) observe that communication channels—verbal, nonverbal, visual, and audio—possess unique complexities, necessitating strategic efforts to enhance communication by selecting appropriate media while acknowledging their strengths and weaknesses. WSU students primarily rely on peer-to-peer communication, which, although rapid in dissemination, may lead to misinformation. As highlighted by Sarai and Gotora (2021, p. 389), higher education institutions like WSU should acknowledge and effectively manage informal communication channels within a comprehensive communication framework.

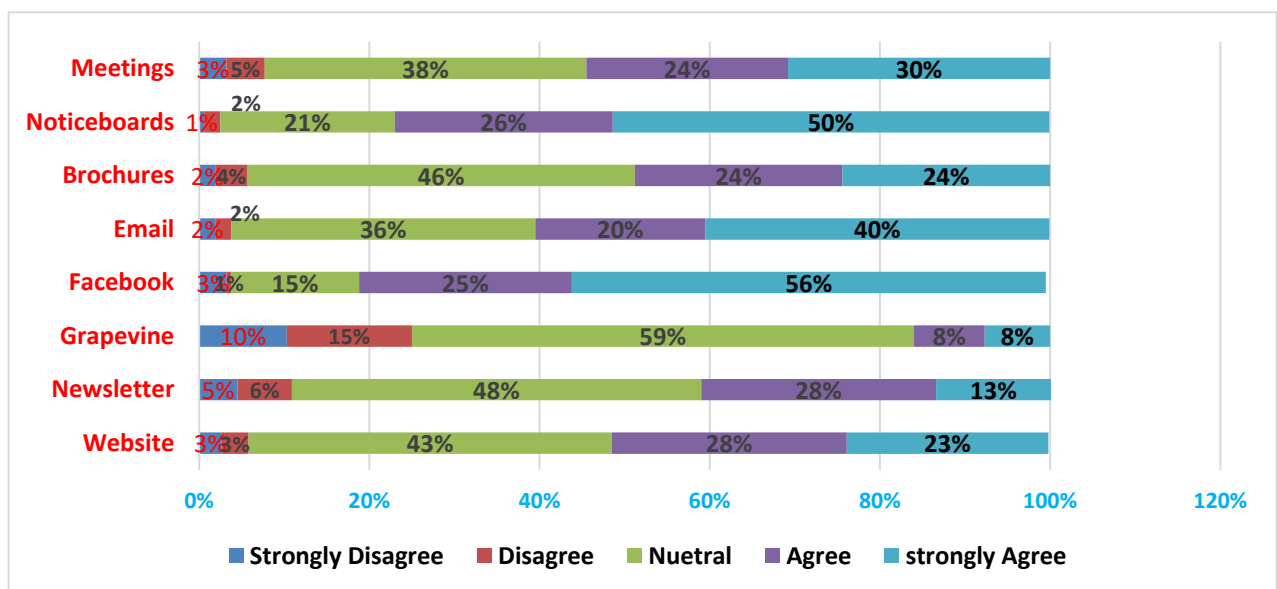


Figure 4. Effectiveness of the communication tools in receiving information

A majority of 56% of surveyed WSU participants identified Facebook as the most effective communication tool, followed by email at 40% and notice boards at 50%. Furthermore, 59% of respondents expressed neutrality toward the grapevine, while 28% found the internal website effective. Tertiary institutions often rely on a formal communication structure encompassing various methods, including both informal (grapevine) and formal channels. The significance of university communications contributes critically to the evolution of higher education, underpinned by four principles: immediacy, relevance, automation, and trackability (Cornell, 2025). These principles are essential for fostering impactful interactions that resonate with students and facilitate their decision-making. Effective communication serves not only to disseminate knowledge but also to shape student attitudes and enhance community ties. Consequently, it is essential that WSU adopt strategies that cultivate an inclusive and feedback-oriented culture to bolster both internal and external communication efforts.

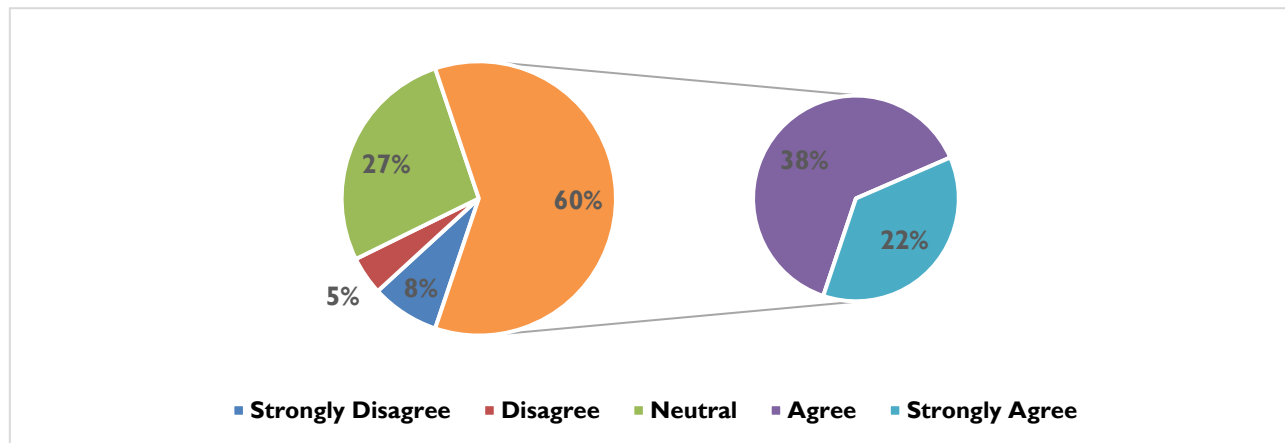


Figure 5. Efficiency of communication tools in a merged institution

The majority of respondents (38%) agreed that effective communication tools contributed to the success of a merged institution, with 27% remaining neutral and 22% strongly agreeing. Proper communication management is crucial for avoiding resistance and rumours during change. The mergers impacted HEIs' internal communication, necessitating a change in organisational structure and culture. WSU's 2005 merger process required a uniform strategic communication plan to communicate progress during and post-merger. Li, Sun, Tao and Lee (2021, p. 2) purport that organisational change involves significant changes in structure, work routines, strategies, or culture.

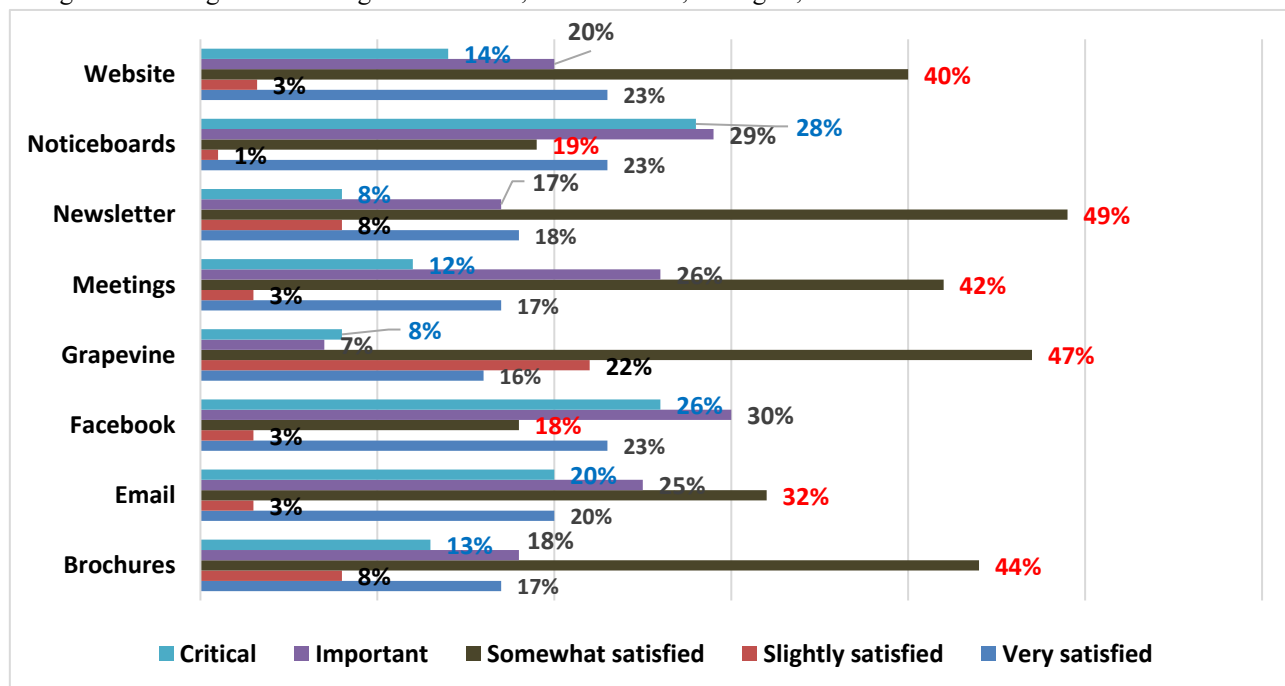


Figure 6. Perception levels of communication tools at WSU

The survey revealed that 23% of respondents were very satisfied with the internal website, while 49% were satisfied with the internal newsletter. The grapevine communication method was slightly satisfying for 22% of participants. Additionally, 26% considered Facebook very important, 44% were satisfied with brochures, and 30% found noticeboards significant for university communications. Effective internal communication, encompassing both formal and informal methods, is crucial for organisations to share information and influence behaviour, according to Tkalac Verčič, Sinčić Ćorić and Pološki Vokić (2021, p. 590). The marketing, communication, and advancement directorate at WSU is essential for developing the university's communication strategy. Therefore, it is imperative that the marketing, communication, and advancement directorate work with executive management to promote innovation and find flexible solutions by creating promotional materials, managing social media, and enhancing the university's image. Additionally, WSU should maintain a strong visual identity by designing promotional content and ensuring consistent representation across online platforms in collaboration with various departments.

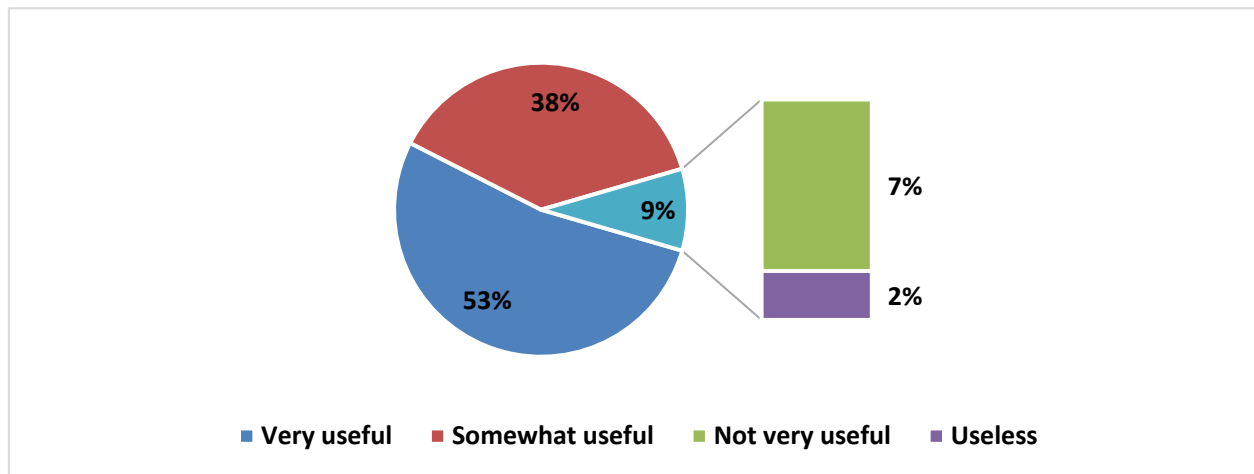


Figure 7. Efficacy of information respondents currently receive at WSU

Figure 7 indicates that 53% of respondents found the information from WSU very useful, while 38% deemed it somewhat useful; conversely, 9% found it not useful. This underscores the significance of effective communication in organisations, noting that those with deficient communication tend to underperform. WSU's strategic plan for 2020-2030 prioritises enhancing ICT capacity, improving access to computing devices, and facilitating the seamless integration of technology for students and staff. This plan aims to unify the communication infrastructure across campuses. Prior to 2025, research on internal communication tools like WhatsApp or SMS was limited, with Moodle and Teams being the primary methods of communication (Songca, Ndebele & Mbodila, 2021:47).

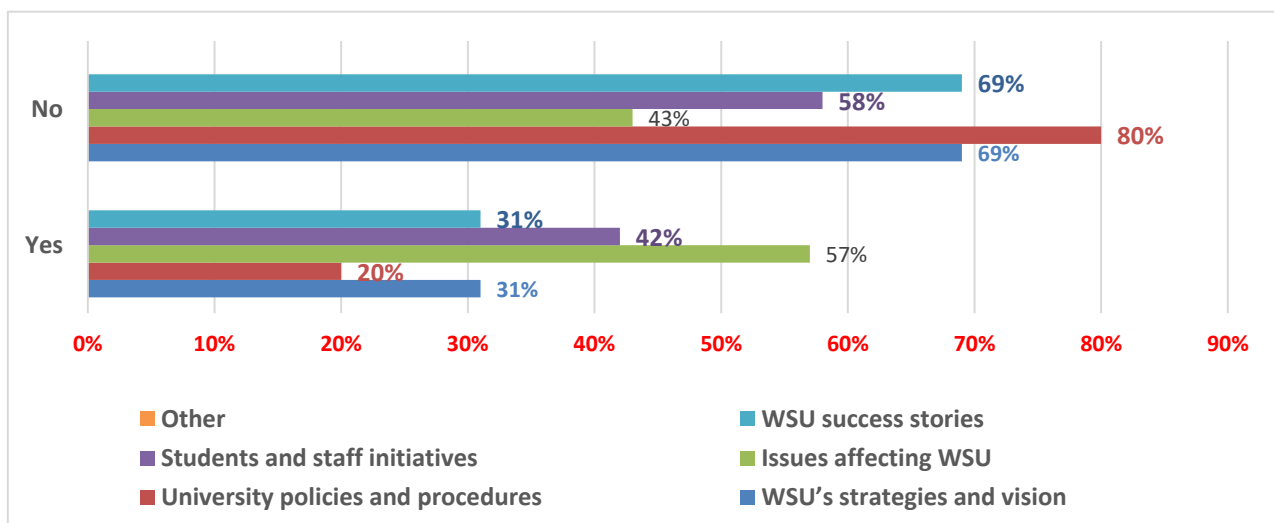


Figure 8. Type of information received by students about various topics

This study found that 69% of respondents at WSU do not receive information regarding the university's strategies, vision, policies, and success stories, while 91% lack access to general information. This indicates a significant need for improved communication and awareness within the institution. The respondents expressed disagreement with five out of six variables related to WSU's strategic direction and policies, suggesting a disconnect between institutional messaging and student understanding. The notion emphasises the importance of both formal and informal internal communication, which should occur at all levels within the organisation. Sadiku, Ogundokun and Ogundokun (2021, p. 115) state that internal communication is performed horizontally or downwards and upwards in the organisation, which is done by all members of an organisation. Management, nonetheless, is responsible for making sure that intercommunication systems are effective and efficient. Current communication methods are neither consistent nor accessible, and students often perceive this information as irrelevant or untrustworthy. Mgweba (2017, p. 54) observed that existing communication platforms are poorly coordinated, infrequent, and lack mechanisms for feedback, which limits their effectiveness in engaging the broader university community. Dwesini (2023) noted that ineffective communication during WSU's merger process further exacerbated misalignment and confusion, particularly among students and junior staff.

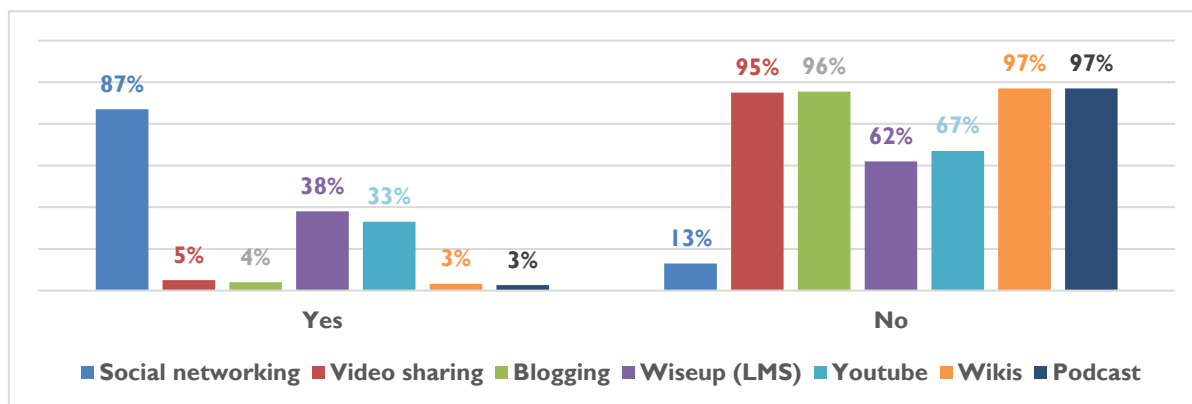


Figure 9. Use of social media by students

Figure 9 above illustrates that a substantial majority of respondents, 87%, engage with social networking platforms, while 95% partake in video sharing. Notably, engagement levels vary for information-seeking activities, with 38% utilising WiSeUp and 67% not engaging with YouTube. The pervasive influence of social media has significantly altered societal dynamics and interpersonal relationships. University students exhibit high engagement with social media platforms, dedicating considerable time to these applications in their daily lives, as highlighted in recent research (Kolhar, Kazi, & Alameen, 2021, p. 2216). Social media at WSU has become integral to students, enhancing both academic and extracurricular activities. Platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram serve as vital resources for accessing learning materials, disseminating academic content, and staying informed about institutional developments. Students widely acknowledge that social media improves access to information and supplements traditional educational practices through on-demand and collaborative tools (Ziar, 2022, p. 107). Moreover, the interactive functionality of these platforms promotes peer dialogue and the creation of informal learning communities. However, the effective implementation of these technologies within an integrated institution like WSU requires institutional backing, as well as quality assurance measures to mitigate misinformation.

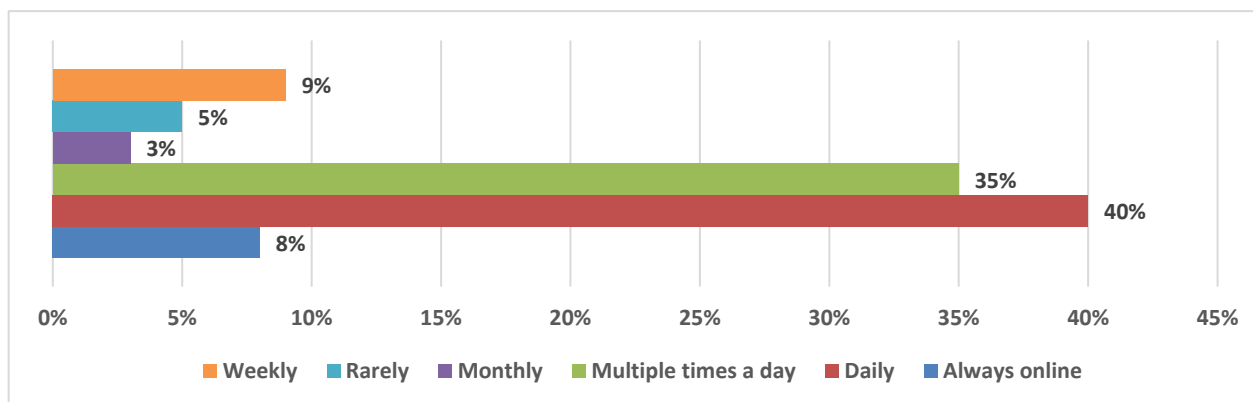


Figure 10. Frequency of social media use among participants

The survey results indicate that 40% of respondents use social media daily, 35% log in multiple times a day, and 8% reported being continuously online. Further, 9% access social media weekly, 5% do so rarely, and 3% access it monthly. Social media platforms serve multiple purposes, including relationship maintenance, information access, and entertainment, thereby becoming integral to many individuals' daily lives. However, excessive use is identified by a preoccupation with social media, an uncontrollable desire to engage with it, and a considerable investment of time and resources (Bahat, 2023, p. 929). Higher education institutions, such as WSU, must adapt to the prevalence of social networks – not only for educational purposes, but also as a marketing tool for communication, often guided by instinct rather than a structured strategy.

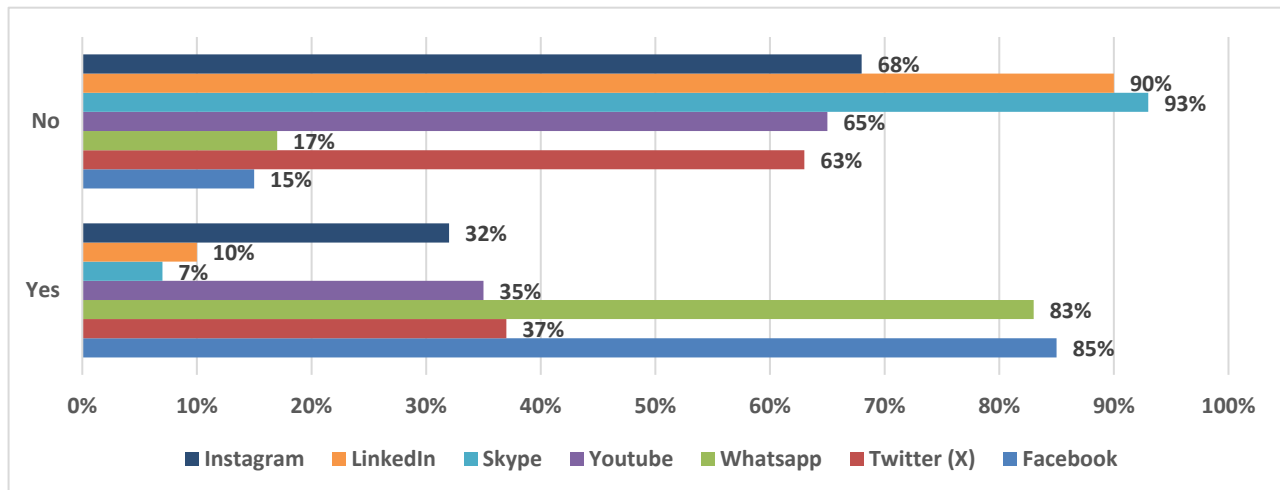


Figure 11. Social media networking sites used by participants

The survey revealed that 85% of respondents primarily use Facebook, followed closely by WhatsApp at 83%, which is valued for its affordability and ease of messaging. Other social networks used include Twitter (37%), YouTube (35%), and Instagram (32%). A study on social media usage among college students identified nine primary objectives: communicating with friends, entertainment, connecting with family, accessing community event information, interacting with classmates, gaining insights on college events, obtaining classwork information, establishing professional connections, and communicating with professors (Astleitner & Schlick, 2024, p. 232). Capriotti and Zeler (2023:2) add that the analysis of social media institutional communication reveals three interrelated dimensions: posting performance, interactivity focus, and content combination. Therefore, it is crucial for WSU to conceptualise an institutional strategy that incorporates these dimensions to effectively analyse and engage with its stakeholders, especially students.

3. Findings

The systems theory perspective highlights WSU as an open system interacting with various external factors, including social, political, technological, and economic influences. The findings revealed that students primarily rely on informal communication methods, such as Facebook and email, leading to a significant underutilisation of formal communication channels like newsletters and the official website. This situation reflects a misalignment within the input-throughput-output-feedback loop, indicating that existing content and design do not adequately meet student preferences. Additionally, there are considerable breakdowns in feedback mechanisms among interdependent subsystems, such as the Marketing, Communication and Advancement office, the ICT department, faculties, and the student body. Notably, 91% of students reported insufficient access to critical strategic and policy information, underscoring ineffective communication flows. The reliance on informal communication channels raises concerns about potential misinformation and highlights the adverse effects of weak internal communication strategies on student engagement and institutional trust. Systems theory posits that successful organisations encourage multi-directional communication while adapting to environmental changes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, WSU faced external challenges, prompting the rapid adoption of new communication platforms. This analysis emphasises the importance of understanding organisational challenges within a broader system, showcasing the interconnected nature of various subsystems.

4. Recommendations

Considering communication challenges faced by institutions, effective strategies are paramount for enhancing student engagement and operational efficiency. A critical issue arises when universities, such as Walter Sisulu University, rely

on a singular communication method, leading to potential disconnects that adversely affect student awareness of essential information. To rectify this, WSU should adopt a comprehensive omnichannel communication strategy that incorporates diverse tools, including email, text messaging, and social media platforms. This approach necessitates meticulous planning to ensure that outreach and internal communications are consistent and effective, particularly during the transition period at the start of the academic year. The implementation of a user-friendly digital communication strategy is essential, involving the redesign of the university's internal website and newsletters to be visually appealing and regularly updated, catering to student needs. As noted by Ramírez and Montero (2024), social media channels can amplify communication efficacy and facilitate stakeholder interaction, although existing literature reveals gaps in their professional utilisation. WSU is urged to leverage platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp for official announcements and engagement, supported by automation to enhance operational communication.

Furthermore, establishing a centralised information hub on WSU's website is recommended to provide coherent content on strategic initiatives and address frequently asked questions, thereby building transparency and trust within the university community. This strategy should be complemented by efforts to promote these digital tools through orientation programmes and ongoing support on their utilisation, emphasising the importance of robust technological infrastructures for effective audience engagement (Santos *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, WSU should implement an accessible mechanism for students to report misinformation, enabling the institution to respond promptly. Lund and Wang (2020:4) highlight that some universities have initiated online chat forums to facilitate communication between the university and students to better meet informational needs.

5. Conclusion

The research conducted at Walter Sisulu University identified significant issues related to the underutilisation of communication platforms and a lack of clarity regarding the university's strategic direction, policies, and general information. While students demonstrated moderate satisfaction with channels such as Facebook, email, and noticeboards, newsletters and the university website were notably underused. Alarming, 91% of students indicated inadequate access to crucial information about institutional policies and updates. The study suggests that despite the prevalence of social media among students, formal communication tools remain underutilised, potentially due to their complex design, infrequent updates, and insufficient user awareness. To mitigate these communication challenges, the establishment of a centralised information hub and proactive dissemination strategies is recommended to improve clarity regarding WSU's strategic direction and policies. Higher education institutions face challenges in effectively communicating important information to students, as the success of the student-university relationship relies on communication satisfaction. With students using various devices like laptops, smartphones, and tablets, institutions must carefully select appropriate communication methods for each message. This is particularly crucial for critical or time-sensitive information.

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Authors contributions

The authors contributed to the article as follows: CM handled data analysis, writing the original draft, software, methodology, and formal analysis; CM and PN were involved in data collection, supervision, and project administration; VP focused on writing and editing. All authors contributed significantly and approved the final manuscript.

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