

**An Integrated Communication Framework for the Department of
Water and Sanitation**

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that *An Integrated Communication Framework for the Department of Water and Sanitation* is my own work and that all sources used are acknowledged with complete references.

I also declare that I submitted the thesis to the appropriate originality detection system endorsed by the University of South Africa and that it met the accepted requirements for originality.¹

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination to the University of South Africa or to any other higher education institution for qualification purposes.

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15 December 2025

Date

¹ RESEARCH TOOLS DECLARATION available in Appendix I

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ABSTRACT

Water governance challenges in post-apartheid South Africa demand sophisticated communication approaches that transcend traditional bureaucratic methods. This investigation proposes an integrated communication framework for stakeholder management in the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) and its diverse stakeholder ecosystem. Adopting an interpretivist paradigm, qualitative methods were employed. These included semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Data collection focused specifically on external stakeholder engagement with the DWS. Thematic analysis yielded five critical themes: stakeholder identification complexities; trust-building imperatives; communication fragmentation challenges; ethical partnership requirements; and framework development necessities. Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory provided theoretical grounding, while Niemann's (2005) integrated communication model informed framework development. Findings illuminated significant gaps between theoretical communication principles and operational realities in South African water governance. The investigation culminated in a proposed six-component integrated communication framework that addresses systematic stakeholder mapping, ethical engagement platforms, vertical-horizontal integration mechanisms, strategic communication drivers, and environmental alignment. This contribution advances theoretical understanding of integrated communication within resource-constrained public sector environments while offering practical guidance for enhancing democratic accountability and service delivery effectiveness within water governance contexts.

Keywords: integrated communication, stakeholder management, water governance, Department of Water and Sanitation, stakeholder theory, South Africa, public sector communication, thematic analysis, qualitative research

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Primary Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Form
DWS	Department of Water and Sanitation
IWRM	Integrated Water Resource Management
SRM	Stakeholder Relationship Management
SWPN	Strategic Water Partners Network
WSSLG	Water and Sanitation Sector Leadership Group

Organisational/Institutional Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Form
GCIS	Government Communication and Information System
IWMI	International Water Management Institute
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAHRC	South African Human Rights Commission
UN	United Nations
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WRC	Water Research Commission

Policy/Legal Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Form
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NWRS	National Water Resource Strategy
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POPI	Protection of Personal Information (Act)
------	--

SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
-----	-------------------------------

Research/Technical Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Form
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CEO	Chief Executive Officer
-----	-------------------------

CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
-----	---------------------------------

FG1	Focus Group 1
-----	---------------

FG2	Focus Group 2
-----	---------------

ICT	Information and Communication Technology
-----	--

IMC	Integrated Marketing Communication
-----	------------------------------------

MAXQDA	Qualitative data analysis software
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CHAPTER 1. BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study focused on how integrated communication strategies can enhance stakeholder management in the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS). The purpose of this study was to examine significant deficiencies in comprehending how public sector organisations can efficiently synchronise communication with various stakeholders to enhance service delivery and democratic accountability. This chapter provides an overview of the study. The chapter presents the background on water governance challenges in South Africa. It further discusses, the research problem, the theoretical framework that underpinned the study, and delineates the methodological approach that was used. The study discusses the key concepts used in this study, how the study relates to integrated communication, and ethical issues that were applicable to the study. Lastly, a chapter overview that shows how each component contributed to addressing the research questions is presented.

1.2 INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Public sector organisations focus on public service broadly and encompass public or government departments (Murray 2022). Integrated communication offers numerous benefits in this context (Belasen & Belasen 2018), helping executives avoid second-guessing objectives and demands by tailoring communication to specific stakeholders and detecting message tone. This allows leaders to focus on messages that align with stakeholder expectations (Belasen & Belasen 2018).

Van Baalen and Mulder (2016) emphasise that top management should understand integrated communication thoroughly and function as supporters and initiators to achieve both horizontal and vertical integration. Communication practitioners play crucial roles in assisting top management to consistently reinforce and foster awareness of the significance of integrated communication in organisations (Van Baalen & Mulder 2016). Smith (2009) supports this perspective, noting that integrated communication benefits organisations by ensuring strategic consistency and providing consumers with a consistent voice.

Research by Taljaard and Beer (2019) revealed that organisations should ensure proper and consistent communication preparation. Thus, government departments must ensure consistently prepared stakeholder communication with aligned messages for more effective engagement. Mudzanani's (2016) study revealed that government departments, including local governments, must integrate all stakeholder communication objectives and ensure these objectives are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant to the department's corporate mission, and include clear achievement timeframes.

The South African public sector context presents unique challenges and opportunities for integrated communication implementation. Unlike private sector organisations that are primarily concerned with profitability, public sector entities must balance multiple, sometimes competing, objectives such as service delivery, democratic accountability, policy implementation, and constitutional compliance (Lægreid & Rykkja 2021). For the DWS specifically, the constitutional recognition of water access as a basic right creates an additional imperative for effective stakeholder communication.

Research conducted on Eskom, a South African power utility, revealed that implementing coordinated communication approaches was critical for success; however, the organisation's size and geographical distribution across the country created challenges for successfully implementing integrated communication strategies (Maenetja 2009). The DWS likely faces similar challenges given its national mandate and dispersed operations.

In order to enhance public accountability, maintain regulatory compliance, and provide precise organisational information, public sector perspectives must be communicated effectively, credibility established, and positive reputations fostered (Belasen & Belasen 2018). Koschmann et al.'s (2015) research showed that integrated communication proves crucial for public sector organisations to better understand communication complexities and their practical application. All communication activities must align with public sector organisational values and contribute to building long-term stakeholder relationships.

The role of government bureaucracy involves regulating, supervising, and maintaining societal relationships (Romil 2013). However, communication absence within bureaucratic structures can create problems, making organisational cultural changes

imperative for improvement (Romil 2013). The study by Romil (2013) on bureaucracy communication and government organisational culture identified resistance to changing organisational culture as a significant public sector challenge. The author recommended following proper processes, promoting understanding, and thorough preparation to avoid resistance and failure.

Several initiatives have shown growing recognition of the importance of integrated communication in water management, in particular. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) developed an integrated communication strategy for the water sector in 2018 to promote information sharing and communication, increase integrated water resource management (IWRM) awareness, and enhance SADC Water Division communication systems (SADC 2008). This strategy aims to strengthen human resources and institutional capacity, secure funding, and improve research findings utilisation. This approach aligns with the DWS's efforts to develop an integrated communication strategy to improve stakeholder communication (SADC 2008).

Laurie and Mortimer's (2019) research established that having senior staff oversee all communication within government departments and sections can improve message consistency. The study by Wood, Gardner, Leask and Ecker (2021) highlighted the significance of uniform messaging and language across diverse government communication platforms. To ensure public trust and optimise cooperation, transparent and civic engagement-based integrated communication approaches prove crucial for swift and extensive government action. While the authors suggest testing these recommendations, they emphasise their importance, potentially achievable through integrated communication frameworks.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2021) investigated public communication structures, mandates, and practices of health ministries and government centres across 46 countries. The research, conducted through 15 country case studies, highlighted the importance of communication in policymaking, advocating two-way citizen dialogue to promote transparency and accountability. The report indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic emphasised the importance of public communication as a vital governance component. It acknowledged the value of communication in engaging stakeholders and benefits from

both internal and external government integrated communication. The study emphasised integrating communication throughout the policy cycle.

The perception of communication as merely a secondary function hinders its use as a strategic policy tool. Furthermore, the authors of the OCED (2021) report highlighted the lack of data and primary evidence as a major challenge. This finding suggests that developing evidence-based integrated communication frameworks for public sector organisations like the DWS could make a significant contribution to both practice and scholarship.

In developing an integrated communication framework for an integrated communication strategy for DWS, several key considerations emerged from this review of public sector applications. First, the integrated communication framework must balance integration benefits with the flexibility required to address diverse stakeholder needs. Second, it must account for South Africa's unique historical, cultural, and linguistic context. Third, it must align with constitutional mandates regarding water access and management. Fourth, it must address the challenges of geographical dispersion and limited resources. Finally, it must establish mechanisms for measuring effectiveness and demonstrating value, a particular challenge in public sector contexts. The full discussion of integrated communication models is in Chapter 3, Sections 3.2.6 and 3.2.7.

1.3 INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION MODELS - AN OVERVIEW

Several models for implementing integrated communication have been developed in both international and South African contexts. Two are central to this study. Hunter (1997) proposed a five-stage model that traces the progressive alignment of communication functions within an organisation, from the consolidation of public relations and marketing to full organisational integration under relationship management principles. Niemann (2005) built on this work to develop a conceptual model specifically designed for South African organisations, one that accounts for the complex interplay between an organisation, its stakeholders, and its broader operating environment. Both models are critically examined in Chapter 3. The DWS context required that these models be assessed not only for their theoretical merits but also for their practical applicability to a national government department navigating water

governance challenges in post-apartheid South Africa.

1.4 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Water service delivery in South Africa faces significant challenges despite constitutional protections and extensive policy reforms, and communication breakdowns frequently lead to implementation failures (Cullinan 2014). The DWS operates within a complex communication landscape where various stakeholder groups often receive inconsistent information about water policies and delivery initiatives. This causes multiple operational challenges and undermines democratic accountability. This discussion is expanded in Chapter 4, section 4.2.

1.5 RESEARCH PROBLEM STATEMENT

This section contextualises and provides the background to the study.

1.5.1 Contextualisation and background

Establishing robust relationships with both internal and external stakeholders is essential for organisations, as it could enhance their reputation and foster positive publicity (Ang 2014). External stakeholders (individuals or groups outside an organisation) who could influence an organisation's activities require particular attention (Taghian, D'Souza & Polonsky 2015). Proactive engagement becomes necessary to effectively manage diverse stakeholder perceptions and interests (Rajhans 2018).

The significance of stakeholder engagement is evident within water governance contexts. Megdal, Eden and Shamir (2017) state that the global focus on this issue reflects increasing recognition of the critical role of stakeholder involvement in addressing vital water challenges. Collaborative efforts among international organisations and various sectors underscore this recognition. These researchers emphasise that early transparent consultation, inclusiveness, and responsiveness remain key to successfully engaging communities in decision-making processes. However, stakeholder engagement in water management frequently creates conflicts stemming from differing interests, potentially resulting in mistrust and diminished cooperation (Shoko 2025).

Akhmouch and Clavreul (2016) observe that, despite recommendations to involve stakeholders in water management, achieving meaningful representation proves challenging in practice. Balancing representation across water sector stakeholders requires sustained effort, which renders optimal inclusiveness unfeasible in the short term because of varying interest levels or limited resources. Research by Funke et al. (2007) and Shoko (2025) reveals specific challenges in South African water governance, where historical inequalities continue to shape participation patterns and stakeholder agency in decision-making processes. These researchers' work suggests that integrated communication approaches require explicit attention to these structural dynamics to achieve genuine inclusivity.

In 2018, the DWS conducted an independent audit with external stakeholders to evaluate their partnerships. The audit report revealed significant concerns of water users (that is, the private sector, community members, and various organisations). Critical issues highlighted included fragmented communication, inconsistent messaging, poor message quality, and diminished trust in the department (Department of Water and Sanitation [DWS] 2018).

Effective communication and coordination are crucial for building trust among stakeholders in the water sector, including sector members and the public (DWS 2018). A search of the Sabinet database yielded limited studies on communication integration within South Africa's water sector. Ngcobo (2016) and Niemann (2005) recommend that additional research be conducted on stakeholder communication integration within the South African context. To address this research gap, an integrated communication framework was developed that the DWS could draw on to effectively integrate communication to manage its stakeholders. Thus, this study proposes a contextually relevant integrated communication framework for South African water governance by integrating stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984) with integrated communication frameworks (Niemann 2005).

1.5.2 Relevance of the study and its connection to field of communication

This study advances communication research by exploring stakeholder management dynamics. Organisations could manage their external stakeholder relationships through an integrated communication framework that delivers effective, targeted

communication while responding to stakeholder needs. The DWS in South Africa prioritises effective stakeholder communication to deliver essential services to the public. In this study, existing stakeholder communication practices at the DWS were analysed and developed an integrated communication framework, which fills a significant gap in the literature and serves as a valuable tool for practitioners and policymakers.

1.5.3 Link to the field of communication

The study remained deeply rooted in the field of communication studies while incorporating an integrated communication frameworks from the fields of stakeholder management, integrated communication, and organisational communication. Proposing the integrated communication framework relied on a sophisticated understanding of stakeholder relationship complexities and effective communication practices to manage these relationships. The study examined how communication strategies combined with stakeholder management enable organisations to achieve effective stakeholder interactions that enhance reputation and social acceptance. This study emphasises the importance of integrated communication to achieve organisational objectives through a comprehensive approach that addresses multiple stakeholders, communication channels, and messages. It highlights key communication challenges that advance knowledge and inform an integrated communication frameworks, practical applications, and policy development.

1.5.4 Other studies in the field

An extensive literature review revealed that few studies had focused on applying integrated communication strategies within South African government departments, particularly the water sector. Research by Taljaard and Beer (2019) stresses the necessity for government departments to ensure consistently well-prepared communication with stakeholders, with strategically aligned messages that enhance outreach effectiveness. Moreover, Mudzanani (2016) highlights the importance for government departments, including local governments, to integrate communication objectives of all stakeholders. These objectives should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant to the department's overarching mission and accompanied by defined timeframes for attainment (Mudzanani 2016).

Research indicates that integrated communication becomes increasingly important for public sector organisations that strive to build trust and enhance transparency (Nxumalo 2025; Shoko 2025). Given the aforementioned realities, this study aimed to develop a communication framework that could guide more effective integrated communication between the DWS and its external stakeholders.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary research question was: *How should the Department of Water and Sanitation integrate its external stakeholder engagement efforts?*

The secondary research question includes the following:

- i) How does the DWS currently integrate its external stakeholder communication?
- ii) How do external stakeholders perceive their current engagements with the DWS?
- iii) What should a normative framework for integrated communication between the DWS and its external stakeholders constitute?

1.7 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The main aim of this study was to develop a theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy for the DWS to manage its stakeholders.

Moreover, according to Farrugia, Petrisor, Farrokhyia and Bhandari (2010:6), “research objectives are what the researcher wants to achieve with the study”. Thus, the research objectives guide the outcomes of a study. The research objectives were as follows:

- i) To explore how the DWS integrates external stakeholder communication.
- ii) To describe whether DWS external stakeholders are satisfied with its external stakeholder communication strategy.
- iii) To explore challenges and opportunities the DWS faces in integrating external stakeholder communication.
- iv) To propose a framework that can be used to integrate communication between the DWS and its external stakeholders.

1.8 KEY CONCEPTS

This section defines two key concepts used in this study, namely stakeholder communication and integrated communication strategies.

1.8.1 Stakeholder communication

Stakeholder engagement is crucial for cultivating and sustaining positive relationships between organisations and their stakeholders (Aldoory & Grunig 2012). Communication between organisations and stakeholders is a reciprocal process, intended not merely to influence or share ideas but also to gain insights into stakeholder perspectives (Adekola & Chia 2024). Furthermore, Freeman (2004:237) describes stakeholder management as a concept “built on a partnering mentality”, encompassing communication, negotiation, contracting, relationship management, and motivation.

1.8.2 Integrated communication

Integrated communication “refers to unity of effort” (Niemann 2005:108). Integration constitutes an organisational-wide activity involving consistent messaging to stakeholders. In the South African context, research, including Ngcobo’s (2016) study, emphasises the necessity of integrating organisational stakeholder communication. Communication must function as a centralised department rather than a separate unit within an organisation. Such an approach mitigates potential tensions among various communication functions. As suggested by Ngcobo's (2016) findings, communication in any government department must be integrated to operate cohesively.

Research by Taljaard and Beer (2019) suggests that organisations should ensure proper and consistent preparation in communication efforts. Building on their findings, government departments must ensure consistently well-prepared stakeholder communications, aligning messages for optimal effectiveness. In addition, Mudzanani (2015) recommends that organisations (in the case of this study, government departments like the DWS) integrate all communication objectives, ensuring they remain SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound).

The next section discusses the theoretical framework that guided this study.

1.9 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework is premised on the stakeholder theory. Freeman's (1984) landmark text, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, established the foundational argument that organisations cannot act responsibly or effectively, by attending only to shareholders and immediate clients. They must identify and engage all groups who can affect or are affected by their activities (Freeman 1984).

Stakeholder theory emphasises the significance of stakeholder and partner involvement in determining organisational success or failure (Valentinov, Roth & Will 2018). Stakeholders should participate in strategic planning processes to identify mutual support and collaboration opportunities (Brown & Forster 2013). Furthermore, stakeholder theory concerns an organisation's ethical and moral values; this definition includes decision makers and those impacted, whether positively or negatively, by organisational decisions. This definition by Barquet, Segnestam and Dickin (2022:5) was adopted in the current study.

Bridoux and Stoelhorst (2022) describe the theory as encompassing three distinct dimensions: an economic dimension (value creation), a social dimension (relationship management), and a moral dimension (fairness). All three dimensions are relevant to the DWS context. The DWS creates value for South African society through water and sanitation services. It manages relationships with a wide and complex stakeholder ecosystem. And it operates under constitutional and legal obligations that are explicitly moral in character the right to water is a human right in South Africa.

Mumby and Kuhn (2019:12) postulate that "all complex organisations consist of intricate webs of interconnected communication activities, the integration of which determines the success or failure of the organisation". They explain that communication integration involves centralised control over communication processes (Mumby & Kuhn 2019). An integrated communication strategy based on stakeholder theory would help the DWS create a more inclusive, effective, and responsive approach to managing relationships with external stakeholders. The selection of stakeholder theory as the grand theory has concrete effects on the study's design. It requires that the sample include the full range of external stakeholders, not only those who are formally organised or easily accessible. It requires that the analysis attend to what different stakeholder groups need from communication, not only what the DWS

wants to communicate. And it provides the analytical vocabulary stakeholder identification, mapping, classification, and engagement that structures the empirical chapters.

However, stakeholder theory is applied critically in this study. The theory was developed in commercial, Global North contexts. The DWS is a post-colonial public sector institution operating in a society still working through the consequences of apartheid-era governance failures. A theory developed to serve corporate managers cannot be transplanted without adjustment. The study adapts the theory through engagement with South African public administration research and through the empirical data generated in the interviews and focus groups.

This approach could lead to improved outcomes in water management and sanitation initiatives. According to this theory, organisations must engage stakeholders proactively to ensure that both organisational and stakeholder objectives are achieved. Chapter 3 expands further on the nature of stakeholder theory (section 3.2.3) and its approaches (section 3.2.4).

1.10 RESEARCH PARADIGM, DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research paradigm, design and methodology employed in this study are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

1.11 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness criteria are discussed in Chapter 4, Section 4.8.

1.12 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

This section discusses the study's contribution in relation to global and Global South stakeholder management knowledge.

Stakeholder relationships are not peripheral concerns for organisations. They are central to governance, legitimacy, and long-term survival. This conviction runs through the body of global stakeholder management literature and is now firmly embedded in South Africa's most authoritative governance frameworks (Bosman and Engelbrecht 2021; King Committee on Corporate Governance 2016; Institute of Directors in South

Africa 2025).

This study contributes at four interlocking levels: global stakeholder management theory, public sector communication scholarship, the Global South governance knowledge base, and the specific institutional needs of the South African water sector. Each level is discussed below.

1.12.1 Contribution to Global Stakeholder Management Knowledge

Stakeholder theory has developed considerably since Freeman's (1984) foundational work. Contemporary scholarship has moved beyond the original instrumental framing to recognise that stakeholder engagement is simultaneously an economic, social, and ethical imperative (Bridoux & Stoelhorst 2022). Despite this theoretical development, most empirical work on stakeholder communication has been conducted in private sector, North American, and Western European contexts (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman 1995). The public sector, and specifically national government departments in sub-Saharan Africa, remains comparatively under-studied.

This study addresses this gap directly. By developing a communication framework for an integrated communication strategy in a national government department operating in a post-apartheid, resource-constrained environment. The study generates knowledge that existing global models did not anticipate. The findings extend stakeholder theory's explanatory reach into contexts where relationships between state institutions and citizens are shaped not only by strategic interest but also by historical injustice, unequal access to resources, and constitutional obligations (Akhmouch & Clavreul 2016).

1.12.2 Contribution to the Global South Knowledge Base

The Global South remains underrepresented in dominant communication and governance literatures (Zhong 2024). Frameworks developed in the Global North are often adopted as universal standards, even when they were constructed without reference to the structural realities of post-colonial states, resource governance challenges, or participatory deficits rooted in apartheid-era exclusions. This study contributes to redressing that imbalance.

The South African water sector provides a distinctive setting for testing and extending

integrated communication theory. Water governance in South Africa operates at the intersection of constitutional rights, historical exclusion, institutional fragmentation, and a diverse multilingual citizenry. Communication frameworks developed for this context must grapple with structural challenges that models from the Global North were not designed to address. The integrated communication framework proposed in this study provides a locally grounded, empirically tested contribution to Global South governance communication scholarship.

Specifically, the study's findings align with a growing body of literature that calls for context-sensitive communication strategies in African public sector organisations (Siangulube 2024; Oke & Awoyemi 2024). That body of work consistently argues that effective stakeholder communication in the Global South requires explicit attention to power asymmetries, historical communication deficits, and the need to build institutional trust rather than manage existing relationships.

1.12.3 Alignment with the King IV and King V Reports on Corporate Governance

The King IV Report on Corporate Governance for South Africa (King Committee on Corporate Governance 2016) represents a landmark development in South African governance philosophy. King IV shifted the country's governance conversation away from rule-based compliance toward an outcomes-based approach. One of King IV's central principles holds that organisations must adopt a stakeholder-inclusive approach in all governance decisions. Stakeholder relationships are not optional additions to governance practice, they are foundational to it. The report explicitly states that organisations exist within society and must respond to the legitimate and reasonable needs, interests, and expectations of their stakeholders (King Committee on Corporate Governance 2016:9).

King IV applies to all organisations, not only private sector companies. Section supplements were specifically designed to make the principles accessible to public entities, municipalities, and non-profit organisations (King Committee on Corporate Governance 2016:10). As a national government department, the DWS falls squarely within the scope of King IV's stakeholder-inclusive governance philosophy. This study's proposed framework directly addresses the gap between the King IV principle

of stakeholder inclusivity and the DWS's documented communication failures.

The King V Report on Corporate Governance (Institute of Directors in South Africa 2025), which came into effect on 1 January 2026, builds on and deepens King IV. King V strengthens the requirement for stakeholder engagement by requiring governing bodies to adopt a genuinely stakeholder-inclusive approach, moving beyond procedural consultation toward authentic two-way communication. King V's emphasis on integrated thinking requires organisations to understand the interdependencies between their financial, environmental, social, and governance activities and to communicate these interdependencies meaningfully to all stakeholder groups (Institute of Directors in South Africa 2025).

This study's integrated communication framework speaks directly to both documents. The model proposed in Chapter 6 provides the DWS with a structured approach to stakeholder communication that aligns with the governance expectations set by both King IV and King V. By doing so, the study positions itself as not only academically relevant but also institutionally applicable. The framework offers a practical tool for implementing the governance principles that South Africa's most authoritative corporate governance codes now require of all organisations, including public sector departments responsible for service delivery.

1.12.4 Significance for Public Sector Service Delivery

Beyond theoretical contribution and governance alignment, this study has direct practical significance for the DWS and for South African public sector communication more broadly. Effective stakeholder communication is not a cosmetic or reputational concern. It is a functional requirement for service delivery. When communication between the DWS and its external stakeholders fails, the consequences are material: water service protests, regulatory disputes, reputational damage, and reduced public trust in state institutions (DWS 2018).

The integrated communication framework developed in this study provides a systematic tool for diagnosing and addressing these failures. It translates theoretical commitments from stakeholder theory, integrated communication theory, and governance principles into operational guidance that communication practitioners within the DWS can use. In this way, the study bridges the frequently noted gap

between academic theory and public sector practice (Muller 2018).

Collectively, these four levels of significance establish this study as a contribution that is simultaneously theoretically grounded, globally relevant, locally contextualised, and practically applicable. The following section outlines the limitations that shaped the scope of the investigation.

1.13 LIMITATIONS

Limitations of the study are discussed in Chapter 4, Section 4.9.

1.14 DEMARCATION OF THE STUDY

Table 1.1: Demarcation of the study in terms of the research questions addressed

Chapter	Purpose of the chapter	Research Questions addressed
Chapter 1	Background and Orientation	All three research questions
Chapter 2	Meta-theoretical Framework	Research question 3
Chapter 3	Critical Literature Review	Research question 3
Chapter 4	Research methodology	All three research questions
Chapter 5	Results	All three research questions
Chapter 6	Findings and Interpretations	Research question 3
Chapter 7	Conclusions and Recommendations	All three research questions

1.15 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations are addressed in Chapter 4, Section 4.10.

1.16 CHAPTER OUTLINE

Each chapter served a distinct purpose in addressing the research problem.

Chapter 1: Background and Orientation

This chapter provides the background to the study, introduces the research problem, and justifies the investigation. It outlines the research questions, and the aim and

objectives that guided the study and presents a brief overview of the methodological approach. The significance of the research for both scholarly knowledge and practical application is underscored.

Chapter 2: Meta-theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical underpinnings of the study through detailed exploration of stakeholder theory and its various approaches. The study synthesises integrated communication concepts with stakeholder theory to construct the communication framework that guided the empirical investigation. The theoretical foundation provided the conceptual structure for the research methodology.

Chapter 3: A Critical Literature Review

Chapter 3 presents a comprehensive review of existing literature on integrated communication and stakeholder management. The chapter examines definitions, models, approaches, and applications of integrated communication and identifies theoretical gaps. The theoretical foundation for the study is established, and the research is positioned within the broader scholarly conversation.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

Chapter 4 discusses the research design and methodological approach that were followed in this study. It further provides a detailed explanation of the research paradigm, sampling procedures, and method of data analysis. Trustworthiness, reliability, validity, and ethical considerations are also discussed.

Chapter 5: Results

This chapter presents the results of data collected through interviews and focus group discussions. Findings are organised by theme across two datasets: online semi-structured interviews with external stakeholders and focus group discussions with DWS managers.

Chapter 6: Findings and Interpretations

This chapter presents the integrated communication framework developed from the empirical findings and theoretical insights. It provides a critical reflection on the framework and outlines its alignment with the DWS context and an implementation plan.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

The final chapter synthesises the research findings and theoretical contributions. Conclusions are drawn about the study's significance and implications. The study highlights the contributions of the study to both theory and practice. Limitations of the study are acknowledged, and suggestions are made for future research. The study makes recommendations regarding implementing the integrated communication framework.

1.17 SUMMARY

This chapter provided an introduction to the study. The study was contextualised by discussing the background to the study and outlining the research questions, aim and objectives. Furthermore, key concepts and the theoretical point of departure of the study were explained. The research design and methodology were summarised. In addition, applicable ethical considerations were discussed. Lastly, a chapter outline was provided.

CHAPTER 2. META-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Research does not happen in a vacuum. Every study begins from a position, a set of assumptions about what can be known, how it can be known, and why it matters. These assumptions are rarely made visible. A meta-theoretical framework brings these assumptions to the surface. It states them clearly and justifies them, so that the study can be evaluated not only for its findings but for the foundation on which those findings rest (van der Waldt 2020).

The purpose of this chapter is to present that foundation for this study. The study set out to develop an integrated communication framework for the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) and its external stakeholders. The worldview adopted for the study was based on, how to approach knowledge generation, which grand theory would best explain the research problem, and which specific models would guide the framework development. Each of these choices carries consequences. The meta-theoretical framework presented here makes those choices explicit and shows how they connect to one another.

The chapter is organised as follows. Section 2.2 presents the meta-theoretical elements. Section 2.3 presents the full meta-theoretical framework in table format, covering all seven elements in the sequence recommended by Van der Waldt (2020): worldview, methodological orientation, philosophical assumptions, grand theory, relevant disciplines, specific theories and models, and key concepts. Section 2.3 presents Niemann's (2005) conceptual model, which is the primary implementation framework informing this study. Sections 2.4 to 2.10 provide an analytical discussion of each meta-theoretical element. Section 2.11 presents the chapter summary.

2.2 META-THEORETICAL ELEMENTS

This section examines the elements of the meta theoretical framework for this study. The following section presents a meta-theoretical framework for the study.

Table 1.2: Meta-theoretical framework for the study

ELEMENT	POSITION ADOPTED	RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE FOR THIS STUDY
1. Worldview	Interpretivism	The interpretivist worldview holds that social reality is constructed through human experience and meaning making. There is no single, pre-existing truth waiting to be discovered. Meaning is negotiated through interaction, language, and context (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The study examines how the DWS and its external stakeholders understand and experience communication. That is an inherently relational and perceptual question. It cannot be answered from outside the human experience of those involved. The interpretivist is not a philosophical preference; it is the only position that fits the research problem.
2. Methodological Orientation	Qualitative and Inductive	Qualitative research explores meanings, processes, and experiences. An inductive orientation allows theoretical insights to develop from the data rather than testing a pre-set hypothesis (Bendassolli 2013). The DWS's communication challenges have not been studied in depth in the South African water governance context. What is needed is not measurement but understanding. Inductive, qualitative inquiry allows the study to remain open to what participants actually experienced, rather than confirming what existing models predict.
3a. Ontology	Constructivist	Constructivist ontology holds that there is no single, objective reality. Multiple realities exist at the same time, each shaped by the position, history, and experience of the person or group in question (Kivunja & Kuyini 2017). The DWS's internal perception of its communication efforts diverges sharply from how external stakeholders experience them. The 2018 independent audit confirmed this gap. A study that acknowledged only one of these realities would produce a partial and misleading picture.
3b. Epistemology	Subjectivist	Subjectivist epistemology holds that knowledge is not independent of the knower. The study is part of the knowledge-generating process (Creswell & Creswell 2018). This position requires that the researcher manage her own influence through reflexivity. The researcher's professional experience in the water governance sector is an asset that provides contextual depth. It is also a risk that must be managed through transparent practices, such as reflexivity journaling and independent peer review of analytical interpretations.
3c. Axiology	Value-laden Inquiry	Research is never value-free. The values the researcher holds shape what is studied, how participants are engaged, and how findings are interpreted (Creswell & Creswell 2018). This study is committed to democratic accountability,

		equitable service delivery, and the communication rights of historically excluded communities. These values are not hidden. They are stated, justified, and managed. They influenced decisions about which stakeholder groups were prioritised in sampling, and how the final framework was designed.
4. Grand Theory	Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory	Stakeholder theory holds that organisations cannot succeed or act ethically by serving only shareholders or immediate clients. They must identify and engage all groups who can affect or are affected by their activities (Freeman, 1984). The DWS is a constitutional body with legal obligations to deliver water and sanitation services to all South Africans. Its stakeholder ecosystem is wide and complex. Stakeholder theory provides the normative architecture that determines whose voices count, why they count, and how they should be engaged.
5. Relevant Disciplines	<i>Communication science; Public administration; Organisational theory; Water governance studies</i>	Communication science provides the theoretical language for understanding how messages, channels, and feedback loops work across organisational boundaries. Public administration theory contextualises the DWS as a bureaucratic entity with governance obligations and accountability structures. Organisational theory explains how internal coordination functions. Water governance studies provide the empirical and historical context. No single discipline can explain the DWS's communication failures. They are simultaneously a communication science problem, a public administration problem, and a water governance problem. The cross-disciplinary approach is therefore a methodological requirement, not merely an academic decoration.
6. Specific Theories And Models	Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory; Niemann's (2005) Conceptual Model; Barker's (2013) Integrated Communication Theory	Freeman (1984) answers the normative question: who must be engaged and why. Niemann's (2005) conceptual model answers the operational question: how should integrated communication be structured and implemented? Barker (2013) provides the ten strategic drivers of integrated communication, specifying the organisational conditions that must be in place for integration to succeed. These three frameworks operate at different analytical levels. Together, they provide a complete logic for understanding, diagnosing, and redesigning the DWS's communication system.
7. Key Concepts	<i>Integrated communication; Stakeholder management; External stakeholders; Communication strategy; Organisational alignment; Feedback</i>	Integrated communication: the coordination of all communication activities to deliver consistent, coherent, and targeted messages to all relevant stakeholders (Niemann, 2005). Stakeholder management: the systematic identification, analysis, and engagement of all parties who have a stake in the organisation's activities. External stakeholders (this study): individuals and organisations outside the DWS who are directly or indirectly affected by its water and sanitation services.

	<i>mechanisms</i>	Communication strategy: a deliberate plan for achieving communication objectives through aligned messages, appropriate channels, and evaluation mechanisms. Organisational alignment: the degree to which all DWS directorates communicate with consistent messages and shared objectives. Feedback mechanisms: structures through which external stakeholders can respond to, challenge, and influence the DWS's communication practices
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Source: Compiled by the researcher, informed by Freeman (1984), Niemann (2005), Van der Waladt (2020), and Korstjens and Moser (2018).

2.3 NIEMANN'S (2005) CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION

This section presents Niemann's (2005) conceptual model, however the model is described in detail later in this chapter. Figure 2.1 is presented here because the model is central to the study's design, its framework development in Chapter 6, and its analytical interpretation of the findings. It is not possible to understand how the study's framework was built without first outlining the structure of the model that informed it.

Niemann (2005) developed this model as part of her doctoral research at the University of Pretoria. The model was designed specifically for the South African organisational context, where existing international models required substantial adaptation to address local communication realities. The model is based on general systems theory. It uses an open systems approach, represented visually (see Figure 2.1) through permeable, dotted-line boundaries between three integration areas (Niemann 2005).

The model has three nested integration areas. The outermost layer is the Environmental Integration Area, which encompasses the economic, political, and social environments within which the organisation operates. The middle layer is the Stakeholder Integration Area, which is further divided into two components: interactivity integration (two-way, symmetrical, purposeful, and personalised communication) and brand contact point integration (messages and incentives, 360-degree brand idea, and timing). The innermost layer is the Organisational Integration Area, which contains the Renaissance communicator and the CEO/top management level, both driven by the strategic intent of the organisation.

Two principles drive the model. First, the strategic intent of the organisation drives all integrated communication. Second, learning organisational principles continuously reposition the organisation in relation to its environment. The red diagonal arrows in the figure represent this ongoing learning and repositioning process. The dotted lines between the areas represent constant interaction and the flow of information between the system's components (Niemann 2005:246).

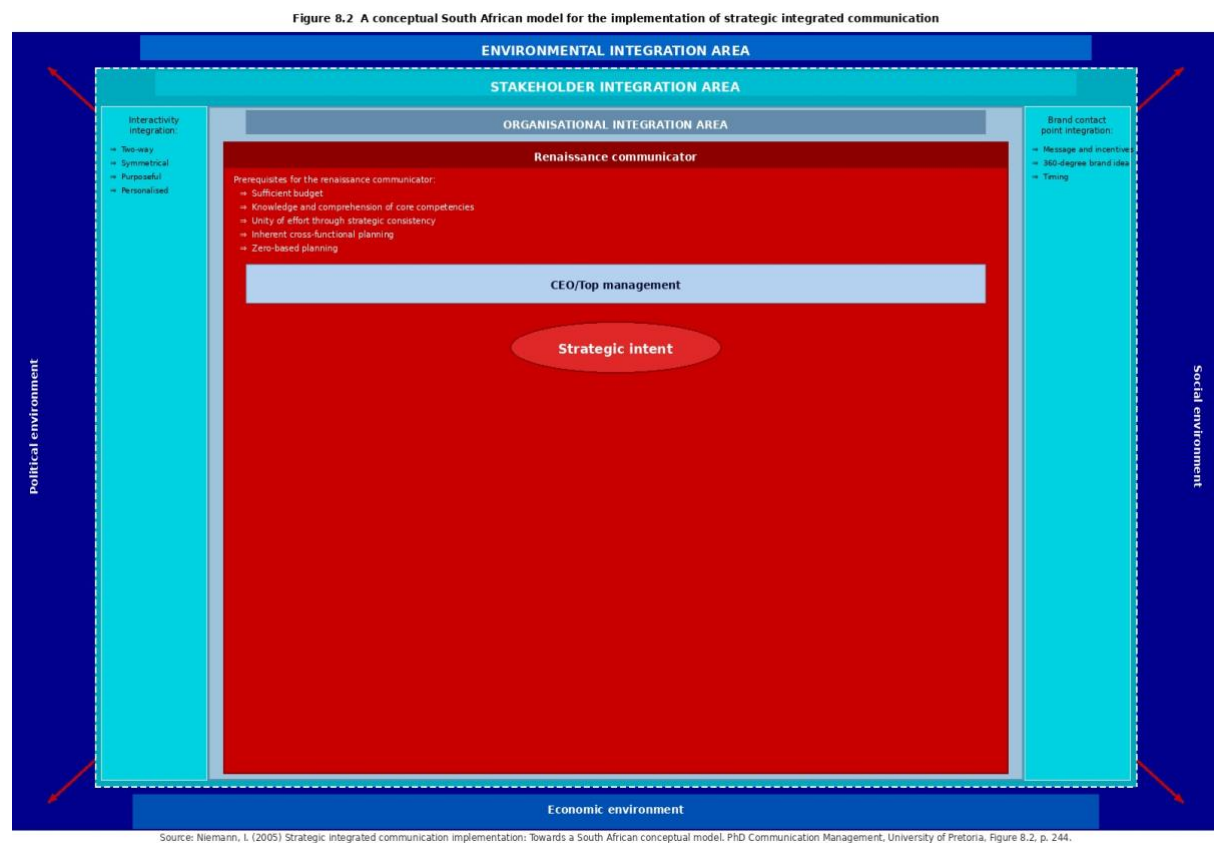


Figure 1.1: Niemann's (2005) conceptual model for the implementation of strategic integrated communication.

Source: Niemann (2005:244).

The model illustrates that integrated communication is not a single activity. It is a system of activities that must be aligned at three levels simultaneously. An organisation cannot achieve stakeholder integration if it has not first achieved internal organisational integration. It cannot achieve environmental alignment if its stakeholder engagement processes are fragmented. The three areas form a logic of integration that moves outward from the core strategic intent through the organisational and stakeholder levels to the broader environment.

Adapting this model to the DWS context required careful consideration of the specific features of South African public sector communication. The model was developed in a commercial context. The DWS operates under constitutional obligations, with politically accountable leadership, a diverse and historically marginalised stakeholder base, and institutional constraints that private sector organisations do not face. Chapter 6 explains how the model was adapted to produce the six-component framework for the DWS.

2.4 ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION OF EACH META-THEORETICAL ELEMENT

The table in Section 2.2 summarises the meta-theoretical framework. What follows is a more detailed discussion of each element. The purpose is not to describe these elements again, but to justify them and explain how they shape the study.

2.4.1 Worldview: Interpretivism

Interpretivism holds that social reality does not exist independently of the people who inhabit it. Reality is shaped by meaning. Meaning is produced through interaction, language, history, and culture. There is no view from nowhere every account of reality is a view from somewhere (Creswell & Creswell 2018).

Choosing interpretivism for this study is not a default or a convenience. It is a substantive response to the nature of the research problem. The DWS's communication failures are not technical failures in the engineering sense. They are relational failures. They involve misaligned perceptions, broken trust, insufficient feedback, and inconsistent messaging. These aspects cannot be measured from outside the experience of the people involved. They can only be understood by internalising that experience.

Interpretivism requires honesty about the researcher's perspective, background knowledge in water governance enriches rather than contaminates the research process. It is a resource which enables more contextually informed questions, deeper engagement with participants, and a more nuanced reading of the data. At the same time, it creates the risk of confirmation bias which is a tendency to find what one already expects. This is why reflexivity is important in this study.

Practically, the interpretivist worldview shaped the study's design at every level. It led to the choice of semi-structured interviews, which allow participants to set the terms of their own accounts. It led to focus group discussions, which reveal how meaning is negotiated collectively. It led to purposive sampling, which prioritises depth over breadth. It led to thematic analysis, which builds understanding from within the data rather than imposing external categories on it.

2.4.2 Methodological Orientation: Qualitative and Inductive

A qualitative, inductive methodology follows naturally from an interpretivist worldview. Qualitative methods collect and analyse non-numerical data, words, accounts, observations, and meanings (Creswell & Creswell 2018). They are appropriate when the aim is to understand how people experience something, not to count how often something happens.

The inductive orientation means the study did not begin with a hypothesis to test. It began with questions. Theoretical insights were allowed to emerge from what participants said, rather than being imposed beforehand. This is the correct orientation for a study entering relatively underexplored territory. Integrated communication in South African public sector water governance has not been studied in depth. There is no established theoretical consensus to confirm or refute. The data must lead to such conclusions (Bendassolli 2013).

The qualitative, inductive orientation also enabled the study to remain sensitive to context. South African public sector communication is shaped by specific historical, political, and institutional realities that generic communication frameworks were not designed to address. The inductive approach kept the study open to those specificities, rather than forcing them into categories that may not fit.

2.4.3 Ontology foundation

Constructivist ontology holds that multiple realities co-exist simultaneously, each shaped by the position and experience of the person holding it (Kivunja & Kuyini 2017). Ontology concerns “the nature of our beliefs about reality” (Creswell 2014:54; Rehman & Alharthi 2016:50). This philosophical dimension is an assumption or general belief system about what constitutes reality. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) assert that ontology

has philosophical roots, encompassing the preconceptions researchers maintain to determine what constitutes reality or makes sense, as well as the nature of the social phenomenon under investigation. Scotland (2012) describes ontological assumptions as concerned with defining reality itself. Researchers adopt positions regarding the nature and functioning of reality, accepting certain truths or facts.

Ontological inquiry prompts researchers to question what forms of reality exist, be it a single, verifiable reality and truth, or multiple socially constructed realities (Rehman & Alharthi 2016). Ontologically, perception of reality involves acknowledging both physical world elements and mental constructs. The ontological component guides researchers regarding appropriate research methods to achieve their investigative aims and objectives (Rehman & Alharthi 2016). Interpretivist ontology adopts a relativist stance, perceiving reality through intersubjectivity while valuing experiential knowledge and meaning in social science research (Ma & Ma 2022). This perspective views the world as a multidimensional system governed by causal structures that may remain latent until activated in specific contexts, at which point they become observable phenomena.

This study benefitted from interpretivist ontology because reality in the water sector context could only be understood through socially constructed meanings developed by key stakeholders. The perspectives of water sector role players remain inherently subjective and fluid and reflect their varied experiences of water resource management and communication processes. This ontological position particularly aligns with the recognition of stakeholder theory that organisational realities emerge through dynamic interactions between diverse stakeholders rather than existing as fixed, objective structures (Valentinov & Chia 2022).

This study is guided by a commitment to democratic accountability, equitable access to water services, and the communication rights of historically marginalised communities in South Africa. These values are not incidental to the research design: they shaped the decision to focus on external stakeholders rather than only on the DWS's internal perspective, the decision to use semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to set the terms of their own accounts, and the decision to build feedback mechanisms into the proposed communication framework. Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue that this kind of value-transparency is an epistemological

requirement of interpretivist research, not a compromise of its rigour.

Ethical dimensions of the axiological position are addressed through adherence to the principles of voluntary participation, anonymity, and informed consent throughout the data collection process (Kimmel 2007). An ethics clearance certificate was obtained from UNISA prior to data collection (see Appendix A). To satisfy axiological criteria, rigour was maintained in every phase of the research, particularly in the ethical treatment of stakeholder perspectives and the careful management of sensitive information about organisational communication practices at the DWS (Baharuddin, Mustafa, Abdullah & Abdullahi 2022). This position has direct analytical consequences for this study..

2.4.4 Epistemology considerations

Epistemology, concerned with knowledge and its validation, involves the “truth of knowledge” (Keyton 2017; Rehman & Alharthi 2016:50). Rooted in the Greek word *episteme*, meaning “knowledge” (Kivunja & Kuyini 2017:27), epistemology explores the nature, forms, acquisition, and reinforcement of knowledge (Scotland 2012). Epistemological assumptions, therefore, influence how knowledge is produced, acquired, and communicated throughout the research process.

Capper (2018) suggests that interpretivist epistemology in organisational contexts focuses on social interactions and their subjective meanings rather than objective reality. This approach prioritises individual perceptions of organisational experiences over universal truths. Thus, stakeholder experiences within the water and sanitation sector should authentically reflect sectoral realities rather than predetermined assumptions about organisational functioning.

The epistemological position adopted in this study recognises that knowledge about integrated communication emerges through dialogue with stakeholders and interpretation of their experiences rather than through measurement of objective variables. This position aligns with stakeholder theory’s emphasis on understanding diverse perspectives and experiences within organisational contexts (section 3.5.6). By valuing subjective knowledge constructed through stakeholder interactions, the study addressed the complexity of communication challenges in the water sector more effectively than positivist approaches might have allowed.

Subjectivist epistemology holds that knowledge is not independent of the knower. The researcher does not stand outside the subject matter, observing it without influence. The researcher is embedded in the knowledge-generating process (Creswell & Creswell 2018).

This does not make the study less rigorous. It makes rigour a different activity. In qualitative, interpretivist research, rigour means acknowledging that influence and managing it transparently. The study does this through reflexivity journaling, member checking, and independent peer review of analytical interpretations. These are not cosmetic additions. They are structural requirements that enable the study's findings to be trusted.

2.4.5 Axiology framework

Axiology concerns the value and ethical considerations that shape research design and decision making, including the responsibilities involved when planning a research proposal". It guides philosophical approaches to ethical decision making (Kivunja & Kuyini 2017:28). Axiology refers to the role of values in shaping research inquiry, including the values researchers bring to their work and how those values influence research design, data collection, and interpretation (Kivunja & Kuyini 2017; Creswell & Creswell 2018).

In qualitative, interpretivist research, values are not treated as contaminants to be controlled or eliminated. They are acknowledged as constitutive elements of the inquiry process itself (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba 2011). When conducting research, maintaining ethical considerations applicable to participants and data remains crucial. One approach involves adhering to principles (i.e., privacy, accuracy, property, and accessibility) (Baharuddin, Mustafa, Abdullah & Abdullahi 2022).

Axiology involves considering values assigned to different research aspects, including participants, data, and the intended audience, to ensure ethical and responsible research practices. To satisfy axiological criteria, the study ensured rigour in every research phase, particularly the ethical treatment of stakeholder perspectives and careful handling of potentially sensitive information about organisational communication practices. See Chapter 5, Sections 5.2 and 5.3.

The axiology of this study also confronts the historical ethics of knowledge production

in South Africa's water governance sector. The interpretivist paradigm adopted here is consistent with post-colonial scholarship that questions the uncritical application of Northern theoretical frameworks to Southern governance contexts (R'boul 2020). Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, developed within a US corporate governance context, does not automatically account for the constitutional obligations, historic inequalities, and redistributive imperatives that characterise the DWS's stakeholder mandate. The adaptation of this theory in Chapter 6 must therefore be understood as epistemologically significant: it is not a minor contextual adjustment but a substantive theoretical contribution to post-colonial communication governance scholarship.

Enhancing credibility when addressing subjective perspectives is an inherent element of interpretive research rather than something to avoid (Korstjens & Moser 2018).

Several strategies enhance credibility:

- i) Triangulating data sources (interviews, observations, document analysis) to corroborate findings and provide multiple perspectives on communication practices (Ahmed 2024),
- ii) Maintaining a detailed audit trail that documents research processes and decisions to ensure transparency (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules 2017).
- iii) Engaging in peer debriefing to challenge researcher assumptions and interpretations, particularly regarding communication dynamics (Korstjens & Moser 2018).
- iv) Transparently acknowledging researcher positionality and its potential influence on research outcomes (Korstjens & Moser 2018).

The interpretivist paradigm was ideal for this study because it yielded rich contextual details about stakeholder experiences and accommodated different, sometimes conflicting, interpretations. This paradigm is particularly suited to the study of integrated communication strategies with their complex social dimensions (Pulla & Carter 2018). This paradigm permits exploration of subtle nuances in stakeholder perspectives and experiences that might remain invisible through other approaches. Rather than seeking broad generalisations, the study focused on specific contextual interactions within DWS. By focusing on participant interpretations and meanings, open-ended questions allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own

words. The approach facilitated exploration of meaning through techniques like narrative inquiry and phenomenological approaches to capture participant experiences (Frechette *et al.* 2020; Patterson 2021; Scheibelhofer 2023). Rather than forcing data into predetermined categories, inductive data analysis allowed for themes to emerge from participant accounts. Participants' language and direct quotes were incorporated, ensuring their voices remained prominent in the final report.

The interpretivist paradigm illuminated different stakeholder interpretations of and reactions to DWS communications. It explored how historical contexts, cultural factors, and power dynamics influenced stakeholder perceptions and interactions. This approach identified subtle communication barriers that could have remained obscured by positivist methodologies. It revealed how stakeholders constructed meaning around water and sanitation issues, potentially yielding unexpected insights for the development of communication strategies.

By adopting this approach, the study developed a deeper understanding of complex social dynamics in DWS stakeholder communications. This contextual knowledge informed the development of a more responsive integrated communication strategy grounded in stakeholder experiences and interpretations.

2.4.6 Relevant Disciplines: Cross-disciplinary Thinking

The study draws on four disciplines, each contributing something that the others cannot provide independently. This is not an arbitrary choice. It reflects the structural complexity of the research problem.

Communication science is the primary discipline. It provides the theoretical frameworks for understanding how messages are constructed, transmitted, received, and evaluated across organisational boundaries. Niemann's (2005) conceptual model, which forms the backbone of the study's framework development, belongs to this tradition. The ten strategic drivers of integrated communication (Barker, 2013) also derive from this discipline.

Public administration contextualises the DWS within the South African governance landscape. It explains the structural constraints that shape communication practice inside a large government department: fragmentation across directorates, budgetary

limitations, political accountability pressures, and the tension between professional communication practice and ministerial direction. Without this disciplinary lens, the communication failures at the DWS would appear to be simple problems of poor practice, rather than systemic problems of institutional design.

Organisational theory contributes insight into how complex organisations coordinate their internal functions and manage their external relationships. Mumby and Kuhn's (2019:12) observation that all complex organisations consist of interconnected communication activities is directly relevant here. The DWS's communication failures are partly organisational design failures, different directorates communicating to the same external stakeholders with different messages and without coordination.

Water governance studies provide the empirical and historical context. Research by Muller (2018) establishes that South Africa's water challenges are human and organisational challenges, not only engineering problems. Research by Akhmouch and Clavreul (2016) documents the global difficulty of achieving genuine stakeholder participation in water management. In the South African context, work by Ngcobo (2016) specifically identifies the need for more research on communication integration in the water sector. Without this disciplinary grounding, the study would lack the contextual specificity that makes its framework relevant and useful.

2.4.7 Specific Theories and Models

Three specific frameworks operate in dialogue throughout this study, each at a different analytical level.

Niemann's (2005) Conceptual Model (Figure 2.1) operates at the implementation level. The model identifies three integration areas environmental, stakeholder, and organisational and specifies the components that must be aligned within each area for integrated communication to function. In this study, the model serves two purposes. First, it provides an analytical lens for diagnosing the specific communication failures at the DWS. Second, it provides the structural template from which the proposed six-component framework presented in Chapter 6 is developed. The adaptation required for the DWS context is documented explicitly in Chapter 6.

Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory operates at the normative level. It determines

who the DWS is obligated to engage, why that engagement matters, and what fairness in communication requires. In this study, it drives decisions about which external stakeholder groups should be included in the sample and how the final framework should be weighted in terms of external stakeholder needs.

Barker's (2013) Integrated Communication Theory operates at the strategic enabling level. The ten strategic drivers specify the organisational conditions that must be present for communication integration to succeed: consistent message platforms, coordinated communication functions, shared objectives, and leadership commitment to integration. In the DWS analysis, these drivers serve as a diagnostic checklist. They reveal not only what the DWS is not doing, but what structural changes are required for it to begin doing it.

Together, these frameworks provide a complete analytical logic. Freeman (1984) establishes who must be engaged and why. Niemann (2005) specifies how the communication system must be structured. Barker (2013) identifies what conditions must exist for the system to function. The three frameworks are not in competition. They are complementary layers of a single integrated analysis.

2.4.8 KEY CONCEPTS

The following section provides an overview of integrated communication models and explores its evolution and significance for organisational effectiveness. Two key concepts anchor this study analytically: integrated communication and stakeholder communication. Although both concepts appear throughout the dissertation, their treatment in this section moves beyond definitional summary to examine how they function as analytical tools within the chosen meta-theoretical framework.

- ***Integrated communication as an analytical concept***

In this study, integrated communication is not treated as a fixed, stable entity. It is understood as a dynamic organisational process that requires continuous alignment between message content, communication channels, stakeholder expectations, and organisational values (Barker 2013). This understanding draws on Niemann's (2005) conceptual model, which positions integrated communication as a multi-dimensional construct operating across four integration areas: organisational, brand contact point,

interactivity, and environmental. Each of these areas is analytically relevant to the DWS context, where communication frequently fragments along directorate lines and fails to maintain coherence across governance levels.

Analytically, the concept of integrated communication provides a diagnostic lens for identifying where and why communication breaks down in large, multi-mandate public institutions. The interpretive paradigm that frames this study treats integrated communication not as a technical specification but as a relational achievement something that stakeholders experience differently depending on their position, sector, and history of engagement with the DWS. Hunter (1997) and later Barker (2013) identified ten strategic drivers for achieving integration. This study applies those drivers selectively, informed by empirical findings about which drivers are most relevant in a resource-constrained public sector context (Barker 2013; Niemann 2005).

- ***Stakeholder communication as an analytical concept***

Stakeholder communication in this study refers to the purposeful, structured exchange of information and meaning between an organisation and its identified stakeholders, with the intention of building mutual understanding, managing expectations, and sustaining productive relationships (Freeman 1984). This definition extends beyond the transmission of information to include the relational dimensions of feedback, responsiveness, and acknowledgement of stakeholder voice.

Freeman's (1984) foundational stakeholder theory informs the analytical use of this concept. Stakeholders are understood as individuals and groups whose interests intersect with the DWS's mandate, who have legitimate expectations of engagement, and whose communication needs differ based on their sector, proximity to DWS operations, and resource access. Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) extend this by introducing the salience model, which distinguishes stakeholders on the basis of power, legitimacy, and urgency. In this study, salience analysis is applied analytically to explain why certain stakeholder groups received more consistent communication attention than others.

The concept of stakeholder communication needs analysis is introduced as a specific sub-concept. Communication needs analysis refers to the systematic identification of what different stakeholder groups require in terms of information frequency, channel

preference, level of technical detail, and feedback mechanisms (Gregory, Atkins, Midgley & Hodgson 2020). The empirical findings in Chapter 5 demonstrate that this analysis was largely absent from DWS practice, contributing directly to the communication gaps the integrated communication framework is designed to address.

2.5 SUMMARY

This chapter has laid the philosophical and theoretical foundation for the entire study. It adopts an interpretivist, qualitative approach and uses stakeholder theory, Niemann's conceptual model, and cross disciplinary concepts to guide the analysis.

This chapter also explains key concepts that underpin the framework and positions the study as a context specific case with transferable insight for similar public sector settings.

CHAPTER 3. INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION AND STAKEHOLDER THEORY: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter critically examines integrated communication as a theoretical foundation for developing a communication framework tailored to DWS stakeholder management context. The literature review serves several essential functions to answer the research question, namely, how the DWS can effectively integrate its external stakeholder communication. First, it clarifies the conceptual boundaries between integrated communication and related concepts. Second, it explores the theoretical underpinnings, evolution, and current state of integrated communication scholarship. Third, the applicability of existing models within the context of South African public sector organisations is critically evaluated.

The discussion in this chapter follows a logical progression, starting with definitions of foundational communication concepts before focusing on integrated communication specifically. Through a critical analysis of prevailing models, their strengths and limitations, and application in public sector contexts, this chapter establishes the theoretical groundwork for the framework and proposed integrated communication strategy. Particular attention is given to how these concepts intersect with stakeholder theory, as effective stakeholder management is a central concern for the DWS in fulfilling its constitutional mandate.

3.2 DEFINING INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION

The concept of integrated communication emerged as organisations began to recognise the limitations of fragmented communication approaches. Mulder (2008) observed that organisations experienced declining credibility and damaged reputations because of ineffective coordination and a lack of integrated communications. This recognition prompted both practitioners and scholars to advocate for more comprehensive integration approaches. Integration has become imperative for ensuring communication synergy and consistency (Mulder 2008). It is now considered essential for organisational success (Jerab 2024).

The historical development of integrated communication reveals its evolution from

primarily marketing-focused approaches in the 1980s and early 1990s to more holistic organisational perspectives by the early 2000s. Initially conceptualised as integrated marketing communication (IMC) focused on coordinating promotional elements, the field gradually expanded to encompass broader organisational communication functions, stakeholder relationships, and strategic alignment (Rehman, Gulzar & Aslam 2022). This evolution reflected growing recognition that fragmented communication approaches undermined organisational effectiveness and stakeholder trust.

Practitioners and scholars increasingly recognise that effective, results-driven organisations must prioritise integration to coordinate communication effectively. Integration fundamentally concerns coordinating strategic activities to deliver clear, consistent, and relevant messaging through integrated approaches and coherent strategies (Angelopulo & Barker 2013; Rehman *et al.* 2022).

Technological evolution has expanded the platforms organisations use for communication, necessitating integration of work units, enhancing managerial effectiveness, increasing innovation and creativity, and improving overall organisational performance (Shockley-Zalabak 2015). Consequently, integrated communication has been defined as a cross-functional process involving managing or influencing all communications directed to stakeholder groups and engaging in purposeful dialogue to build and maintain strategic stakeholder relationships (Grigorescu & Lupu 2015). This definition suggests that integrated communication is inherently cross-functional and coordinated, ensuring consistency, continuity, and synergy across organisational functions when engaging stakeholders.

Mumby and Kuhn (2019:12) state that “all complex organisations consist of intricate webs of interconnected communication activities, the integration of which determines the success or failure of the organisation”. They describe communication integration as centralised control over communication processes (Mumby & Kuhn 2019). Kliatchko (2008:140) offers a somewhat different perspective, defining integrated communication as “an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels and results of brand communication programmes”. This definition emphasises how effective communication generates synergy through coordinated messaging.

Integrated communication represents an ongoing process rather than a finished product (Degenaar, Van Aardt & Holtzhausen 2022). Niemann-Struweg and Grobler (2007) suggest that organisations must achieve internal integration before external brand integration can manifest in stakeholders minds. Effective integrated communication proves crucial for seamless collaboration and success both within and beyond organisational boundaries.

Niemann and Grobler's (2011:5) definition of integrated communication is as follows: "the strategic management process of organisationally controlling or influencing all messages and encouraging purposeful, data-driven dialogue to create and nourish long-term, profitable relationships with stakeholders". This definition is particularly suited to this study because it emphasises organisations' need to coordinate and integrate stakeholder communication. It further highlights the importance of communication in building trust and mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and stakeholders.

Taken together, these definitions show that integrated communication is a coordinated, cross functional process aimed at consistency, dialogue and relationship building. From the above definitions, several essential characteristics of integrated communication can be extrapolated: it involves coordinating and managing all organisational communication; maintains message consistency across channels; emphasises dialogue with stakeholders; and aims to build strategic relationships. Integrated communication requires combining all communication activities to achieve ongoing repositioning, effective communication and consistency, essential for organisational survival (Degenaar *et al.* 2022).

This understanding implies that limited resources necessitate careful prioritisation. This is most effectively accomplished through integrated planning. Optimising communication outcomes requires harmonising messages and ensuring all components align and are promptly conveyed. This streamlines communication integration, yielding greater efficiency (Maenetja 2009; Smith 2012).

Having established a conceptual understanding of integrated communication, the following section examines its benefits for organisational effectiveness.

3.2.1 Defining communication and organisational communication

Before discussing the concept of integrated communication, it is necessary first to define the foundational concepts of communication and organisational communication from which it derives. The term “communication” originates from the Latin word *communis*, meaning *communicare* in English (Lunenberg 2010). Scholars describe communication as the lifeblood of organisations the essential binding agent that maintains organisational cohesion (Mumby & Khun 2019).

The conceptual evolution of “communication” has progressed considerably over the past decades. Early models emphasised linear information transfer, while contemporary scholarship recognises its dynamic, meaning-making nature. Adrieli, Hamilton and Ibrahim (2022) position communication as life’s foundation, enabling idea exchange, adaptation to changing environments, and message transmission. Reidhead (2021) defines communication as the transfer of information, ideas, and opinions between individuals, across generations, or to broad audiences. Farukuzzaman and Rahman (2019) further emphasise the role of communication in exchanging information, ideas, thoughts and feelings. Simões, Dimas and Calvão (2016) deem effective communication as essential for organisational success.

Mumby and Kuhn (2019) offer perhaps the most comprehensive definition of communication. They define communication as a “dynamic, ongoing process of creating and negotiating meanings through interactive symbolic (verbal and nonverbal) practices, including conversation, metaphors, rituals, stories, dress and space” (Mumby & Kuhn 2019:38). This definition captures the fluid, interpretive nature of communication and recognises the multiple channels through which meaning is constructed. For this study, Mumby and Kuhn’s definition was adopted. Communication was deemed as an ongoing, evolving exchange of information conveyed through diverse channels. Various scholars concur that communication uses symbols, such as conversation and space, to create and negotiate meaning (Bovée & Thill 2019; Koschmann, Isbell & Sanders 2015).

Moreover, organisational communication involves a specialised application of these principles within organisational contexts. Mumby and Kuhn (2019:39) define organisational communication as “the process of creating and negotiating collective, coordinated systems of meaning through symbolic practices orientated toward the

achievement of organisational goals". This definition highlights the purpose-driven nature of organisational communication and its role in creating shared understanding to support organisational objectives. This definition of organisational communication was adopted in this study, as it encompasses both internal dimensions and external stakeholder relationships, which were critical for developing an integrated communication framework for DWS.

3.2.2 Benefits of an integrated communication approach

Implementing an integrated communication strategy has numerous organisational advantages, particularly relevant to the DWS's stakeholder management challenges. Customer prioritisation is a crucial advantage for organisations that adopt integrated approaches (Kliatchko 2008; Mulder 2008; Smith 2012). Consistent and transparent communication proves vital for customer-focused business strategies, making integrated communication particularly valuable for achieving this objective. However, organisations must ensure coordinated strategy management and implementation, requiring collaboration across departments and employees (Smith 2012).

Developing integrated communication strategies may require significant investment of time and resources, but organisations can realise substantial benefits, including improved programme efficacy and elimination of ineffective service duplication (Mulder 2008). Recent research by Degenaar *et al.* (2022) reveal that well-coordinated communication strategies significantly support organisational goals. By developing integrated communication strategies, organisations can ensure strategic consistency and promote unity of effort between themselves and their stakeholders.

For public sector organisations like the DWS, integrated communication has particular advantages for addressing the complex stakeholder landscape. These benefits include improved accountability and transparency, enhanced service delivery through coordinated messaging, greater stakeholder trust and engagement, and more effective crisis management capabilities (Nxumalo 2025). As constitutional mandates require the DWS to engage diverse stakeholders, from local communities to international partners, an integrated approach provides the necessary theoretical framework for managing these complex relationships effectively.

Van Baalen and Mulder's (2016) research showed that integrated communication

strategies prove essential for organisational competitiveness in environments where simply offering superior products no longer guarantees success. Similarly, Koschmann *et al.*'s (2015) study indicated that integrated communication strategies not only help organisations understand communication complexities but also build confidence in effective application. Ultimately, integrated communication strategies support organisational vision and foster stronger long-term stakeholder relationships.

The benefits of integrated communication for the DWS specifically might include enhanced public understanding of water management issues, improved coordination with other government departments, more effective community engagement in water conservation efforts, and strengthened relationships with key stakeholders across sectors. Mpehle and Khumalo (2023) further highlight how integrated communication approaches in South African public departments contribute to an enhanced service delivery perception among historically marginalised communities by creating more accessible and contextually appropriate engagement channels. However, as the next section indicates, integrated communication approaches also present certain limitations and challenges.

3.2.3 Critiquing an integrated communication approach

Despite its considerable benefits, integrated communication is not without limitations and challenges, which warrant critical examination. When integrating communication, organisations must consider these limitations to maximise the potential benefits (Angelopulo & Barker 2013). Several scholars have raised substantive critiques of integrated communication practices that deserve particular attention when developing frameworks for public sector application.

Johansen and Andersen (2012) argue that integrated communication practices potentially hinder meaningful stakeholder dialogue. They propose that organisations immerse themselves in customer-shared needs and different consumer market cultures rather than promoting a “single voice” approach. This critique holds relevance for South Africa’s multicultural, multilingual context, where diverse stakeholder groups may have significantly different communication needs and expectations.

A further critique concerns the salience model's implicit power architecture. Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) prioritise power, legitimacy, and urgency as salience criteria,

which risks marginalising stakeholders who lack institutional power yet hold moral standing in governance contexts. In the DWS context, rural communities and informal settlement residents have low formal power but high Constitutional standing as right-holders under Section 27 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996). A salience model applied without adaptation to this context would systematically underweight the most vulnerable stakeholder groups. This critique strengthens the case for the adapted identification and categorisation approach in Chapter 6, which supplements formal power mapping with communication needs analysis and Constitutional right-holder status.

Authors and practitioners caution that integration efforts risk sacrificing uniqueness and identity of various organisational units in pursuit of a single organisational viewpoint and message (Christensen, Morsing & Cheney 2008). Henderson, Cheney and Weaver (2014) support this perspective, arguing that contemporary organisations require multiple organisational voices and flexible communication messaging to achieve objectives effectively. For the DWS, this tension between integration and diversity presents a particular challenge. Although consistent messaging about water policies and management may be necessary, different stakeholders from rural communities to international donors may require distinctly different communication approaches. The DWS must balance the benefits of integration with the need for flexibility and responsiveness to diverse stakeholder needs.

Niemann-Struweg and Grobler (2007) identify several barriers that hinder communication integration, including structural barriers arising from cross-training requirements across vertical structures. Additionally, managerial perceptions of integrated communication necessitate developing coordinated planning strategies (Niemann-Struweg & Grobler 2007). Other impediments include compensation barriers, marketing trends, organisations' assumptions about existing integration, short-term planning approaches, and insufficient core communication capabilities (Niemann-Struweg & Grobler 2007).

Another significant critique concerns the substantial organisational adjustments required to implement integrated communication strategies, potentially triggering employee resistance (Niemann 2005). Management must thoroughly understand both integrated communication concepts and implementation plans before communicating

these to staff (Van Baalen & Mulder 2016). Angelopulo and Barker (2013) suggest that integrated communication may merely give an illusion of control while giving limited actual control and ability to coordinate all organisational messages.

Smith (2009) identifies additional critical shortcomings and challenges associated with integrated communication approaches (see Figure 3.1). For the DWS, several additional challenges emerge from the South African public sector context, including the legacy of historical inequalities in service provision, constitutional requirements for multilingual communication, complex intergovernmental coordination needs, and limited resources for communication activities. Ngcobo (2022) highlights how public sector communication in South Africa must navigate complex governance environments where multiple stakeholders operate with varying degrees of authority and legitimacy, creating unique integration challenges not adequately addressed in Western communication models. The proposed an integrated communication framework for integrated communication related to stakeholder management must consider these challenges and limitations, adapting theoretical models to the DWS's specific context while developing strategies to mitigate potential problems.



Figure 1.2: Key shortcomings and challenges of integrated communication

Source: Smith (2009)

The following section examines the strategic drivers that can help organisations navigate the challenges of an integrated communication approach effectively.

3.2.4 Ten strategic drivers of integrated communication

Integrated communication scholars have identified 10 strategic drivers that guide effective implementation (Duncan & Moriarty 1997; Mebuge 2018; Niemann 2005; Ngcobo 2016; Sriram & Maheswari 2013). These drivers provide a theoretical and integrated communication framework for understanding how organisations can overcome implementation challenges while maximising the benefits of integration. Figure 3.2 summarises these strategic drivers. These strategic drivers provide practical guidelines, workable criteria, and significant benefits for enhancing brand value. The drivers can be categorised into three areas: corporate focus, corporate processes, and infrastructure (Mebuge 2018). Research by Ngcobo (2016) and

Niemann (2005) suggests that organisations should prioritise building strong relationships with customers and stakeholders over focusing exclusively on sales and transactions. They recommend creating and maintaining customer information databases while emphasising strategic consistency, purposive interactivity, mission marketing, and zero-based planning.

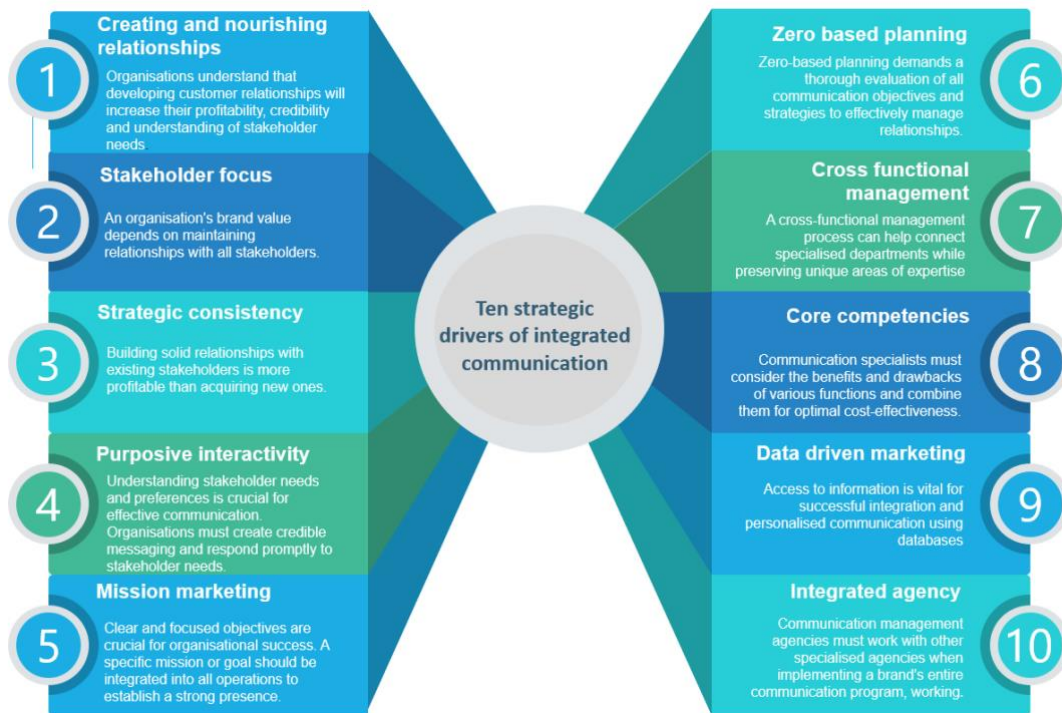


Figure 1.3: Ten strategic drivers for integrated communication.

Sources: Duncan and Moriarty (1997), Mebuge (2018), Ngcobo (2016), Niemann (2005), Sriram and Maheswari (2013)

Mission marketing suggests that every organisational activity, including communication projects and new products, should align with the corporate mission. Zero-based planning advocates starting each planning process anew, conducting SWOT analyses, and using zero-based planning to execute organisational communication initiatives rather than modifying existing plans (Angelopulo & Barker 2013; Mebuge 2018). The authors recommend prioritising cross-functional planning and monitoring departmental planning to develop core competencies, retain existing customers through database management, and implement data-driven marketing approaches.

For public sector organisations like the DWS, these drivers require contextual

adaptation. While private sector models focus on customer relationships and profit maximisation, public sector application must emphasise citizen service, democratic accountability, and constitutional mandates. Within the South African context, these drivers must be interpreted through the lens of the country's historical inequalities, diverse stakeholder landscape, and constitutional imperatives regarding water access.

The significance of these strategic drivers lies in ensuring successful integrated communication implementation by incorporating business, marketing, and communication management dimensions (Mebuge 2018). Mebuge's (2018) research showed that implementing these strategic drivers helped organisations establish lasting stakeholder relationships, ultimately yielding long-term benefits. Sriram and Maheswari (2013) indicate that integrated communication strategies can bridge perception gaps among individuals, organisations, families, and communities. By ensuring coherent and consistent messaging, integrated communication strategies support organisational objectives (Sriram & Maheswari 2013).

For the DWS, these drivers could guide the development of an integrated communication framework for DWS tailored to their specific stakeholder management needs. The corporate focus drivers (i.e. relationship-building, stakeholder focus, strategic consistency) align well with the department's mandate to engage diverse stakeholders in water management. Process drivers (i.e. purposive interactivity, mission marketing, zero-based planning, cross-functional management) provide methodological approaches for implementation. In contrast, infrastructure drivers (i.e. core competencies, data-driven marketing, integrated agency relationships) suggest structural elements necessary for success.

The expanded view of contemporary scholarship on integrated communication has moved away from the narrow marketing communication lens of Duncan and Moriarty (1997). Hollebeek *et al.*'s (2020) recent developments are an extension of the traditional conceptualisations of stakeholders (in Freeman 1984) to include dynamic, co-creative communication relationships. The relevance of this theoretical development is particularly significant for South African public sector organisations, such as the DWS. In this context, traditional Western management frameworks, including Freeman's (1984) binary categorisations, may require adaptations to accommodate the complexities of multi-layered stakeholder ecosystems. The

advancement of Jones, Harrison and Felps' (2018) instrumental stakeholder theory sheds light on how strategic stakeholder communication can create sustainable competitive advantages. This is achieved through value co-creation processes that align with the principles of integrated communication. Bridoux and Stoelhorst's (2022) stakeholder governance framework addresses collective action problems in multistakeholder settings. This approach involves systematic communication coordination mechanisms that resonate with the principles of integrated communication.

Having explored the benefits, limitations, and strategic drivers of integrated communication, the following section examines specific integrated communication models that could inform the proposed an integrated communication framework.

3.3 INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION MODELS

Several integrated communication models offer theoretical foundations for developing frameworks that effectively convey consistent messages to stakeholders, fostering understanding, cooperation, and acceptance. These models propose various approaches for establishing integrated communication within organisations and may provide valuable insights for developing an integrated communication framework specifically tailored to the DWS's stakeholder management needs. This section critically examines two influential models: Hunter's (1997) model for integrated communication and Niemann's (2005) conceptual model for implementing strategic integrated communication. These two models are considered because they together capture both the structural and strategic dimensions of integrated communication.

The preceding sections explored theoretical aspects of integrated communication, including definitions, benefits, limitations, strategic drivers, and models. However, understanding how these concepts apply specifically to the public sector context is crucial for developing an integrated communication framework tailored to the DWS's needs. The following section examines integrated communication within the public sector.

3.3.1 Hunter's model for integrated communication

Thomas Hunter's thesis at the University of Salzburg introduced what would become

known as Hunter's model for integrated communication (Duncan 2020; Niemann 2005). Niemann (2005) considers Hunter's model the most comprehensive analysis of challenges to implementing integrated communication. Based on extensive examination of factors affecting communication structure in corporate settings, Hunter's (1997) five-stage model offers a systematic approach to integration:

- i) Combines public relations and marketing units, encouraging collaboration between these departments.
- ii) Organisation's executive/top management develops necessary skills and recognises marketing and public relations as equally important.
- iii) Communication department establishes three subdivisions – corporate, internal, and marketing communication.
- iv) Communication functions as dominant coalition with marketing and public relations teams as equal management team members reporting to the CEO.
- v) Communication incorporated into relationship management approach, with public relations collaborating with other units for complete organisational integration.

These five critical stages of Hunter's integrated communication model are presented in Figure 3.3.



Figure 1.4: Stages of Hunter's model for integrated communication

Sources: Duncan (2020:68-69), Mulder (2008:167), Niemann (2005)

The first stage brings together public relations and marketing units, encouraging collaboration. The second stage involves top management cultivating necessary skills and viewing marketing and public relations as equally important. This stage requires direct involvement of the organisation's senior leadership. The third stage establishes three communication department subdivisions: corporate, internal, and marketing communication. The fourth stage positions communication as a dominant coalition that recognises marketing and public relations teams as equal management team members reporting directly to the CEO. The final stage incorporates communication into a relationship management approach, requiring public relations to collaborate with other units for complete organisational integration. This model recognises that productive relationships between public relations and other departments, like human resources, are essential for achieving comprehensive integration.

While Hunter's (1997) model offers valuable insights, several limitations emerge when considering its application to the DWS's context. The model's private sector orientation, with its emphasis on marketing functions, requires adaptation for public sector applications where accountability to citizens, rather than customers, is the primary concern. Additionally, the model predates significant technological developments that have transformed communication practices, particularly digital

channels and social media engagement. Finally, the model does not explicitly address the unique challenges of South Africa's multicultural, multilingual environment, or the constitutional mandates governing water management.

Despite these limitations, Hunter's model provides useful guidance for developing an integrated communication framework for the department. Its emphasis on top management involvement aligns with findings on the importance of leadership in driving successful integration. The relationship management focus in the final stage resonates with the DWS's need to build and maintain productive relationships with diverse stakeholders. Additionally, the model's structural recommendations could inform organisational adjustments necessary for effective integration.

For the proposed an integrated communication framework, Hunter's (1997) model highlights the following key considerations: ensuring public relations and coordination integration; securing top management buy-in; establishing cross-functional connections; creating integrated teams; and implementing relationship management processes for both internal and external engagement. These elements could be adapted to address the DWS's specific stakeholder management challenges while accounting for the unique public sector context.

Compared to Hunter's (1997) model, Niemann's (2005) approach offers several advantages for application to the DWS's context. Its broader stakeholder orientation aligns more closely with the department's diverse stakeholder landscape. The model's South African origin means it was developed with greater awareness of local contextual factors. Additionally, its emphasis on environmental integration recognises the importance of considering broader societal, political, and ecological factors, particularly relevant for water management.

However, several limitations warrant consideration. The model's business management orientation, like Hunter's (1997) model, requires adaptation for public sector application. Additionally, while developed in South Africa, the model does not specifically address public sector challenges or constitutional mandates regarding water access and management. Finally, technological developments since the model's creation necessitate updating its application to contemporary communication channels and practices.

For the proposed an integrated communication framework, Niemann's (2005) model

(see figure 2.1) offers valuable guidance on the sequential nature of integration (i.e. internal before external), the three key integration areas (i.e. organisation, stakeholders, environment), and the importance of strategic alignment. These elements could be adapted to address the DWS's specific context while incorporating Mulder's (2008) suggested improvements regarding financial accountability, core competencies, data-driven approaches, and stakeholder-conscious employees.

3.3.2 Niemann's (2005) conceptual model

Niemann's (2005) conceptual model for implementing strategic integrated communication suggests a business management approach that considers the financial impact of integrated communication (Degenaar *et al.* 2022; Mulder 2008; Niemann 2005). Significantly, Niemann (2005:263) states that the "conceptual model consciously takes a broader stakeholder approach to include, by definition, all stakeholders, including internal stakeholders and customers". This comprehensive stakeholder orientation makes the model particularly relevant for the DWS's diverse stakeholder landscape.

Integrated communication involves effectively coordinating an organisation's communication functions through top-down, bottom-up, and lateral integration. This coordination spans from simple message alignment to complex cross-functional collaboration (Degenaar *et al.* 2022; Swart 2018). Niemann's (2005) model proposes a strategic implementation approach based on two fundamental principles: organisational strategic intent directs integrated communication, and organisations must continuously reposition themselves within broader contexts. The diagram of the Niemann's model appears in Chapter 2, Section 2.3

The model comprises three integration areas: the organisation, its stakeholders, and its environment. Internal integration, including CEO and top management involvement, must precede external integration in stakeholder relationships (Degenaar *et al.* 2022; Niemann-Struweg 2014; Swart 2018). This sequential approach recognises that organisations cannot effectively integrate external communication without first establishing internal alignment and coherence.

Mulder's (2008) research identified several improvement areas in Niemann's (2005) communication model. The identified gaps involved issues concerning financial

accountability, core competencies, data-driven marketing, and stakeholder-conscious employees. The model could more clearly and explicitly reflect these elements. Although stakeholder-conscious employees are not directly incorporated into the model, they appear at both the organisational and stakeholder integration levels (Mulder 2008). Despite these limitations, Mulder (2008) considers Niemann's (2005) model among the most comprehensive available. This model is particularly useful for the present study because it foregrounds the internal integration before external communication.

3.4 ORIGIN AND NATURE OF STAKEHOLDER THEORY

In general, stakeholder theory came into being to fill a conceptual gap in traditional models of management, specifically where they relate to shareholders. The first evidence of the use of the term "stakeholders" can be traced back to the early 1960s, where Eric Rhenman (Freeman, Phillips & Sisodia 2018) conceptualised stakeholders as analytical tools for strategic planning. The use of "stakeholders" was already seen to be successful from these early concepts, as Freeman *et al.* (2018) illustrated in an example of a brewery in Mexico that had a successful experience with stakeholder analysis, specifically when it came to gaining an understanding of the role that the government played in their business.

The watershed moment for stakeholder theory, however, came with Freeman's 1984 publication of *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, which catalysed widespread academic interest and practical application (Freeman *et al.* 2018; Keremidchiev 2021). According to Bridoux and Stoelhorst (2022:797), stakeholder theory initially developed as "a theory of, or perhaps rather a perspective on, strategic management". The concept has since evolved considerably, attracting attention across multiple disciplines and becoming particularly relevant for understanding

3.4.1 Nature of stakeholder theory

The main emphasis of stakeholder theory is on understanding who contributes to the decision-making processes, as well as who benefits from or is negatively impacted by the decision making of the organisation (Barquet *et al.* 2022). Hörisch *et al.* (2014) argue that the key idea behind stakeholder theory to find a common interest among

stakeholders instead of just trade-off. By considering and identifying common interests, stakeholder theory could create value for all stakeholders (Bridoux & Stoelhorst 2022).

Rose *et al.* (2018) argue that managers must prioritise stakeholder theory and recognise the significance of all stakeholders. Addressing stakeholder needs potentially enhances organisational sustainability and long-term profitability. In any organisation, considering both internal and external stakeholders and meeting their expectations proves crucial, including previously overlooked stakeholder groups. As this study aimed to propose an integrated communication framework for an integrated communication strategy, incorporating mechanisms for meeting diverse stakeholder expectations was an important consideration. The integrated communication framework for DWS might benefit from soliciting inputs from both internal and external stakeholders to ensure comprehensive coverage.

Research by Langrafe, Barakat, Stocker and Boaventura (2020) suggests that building relationships based on information sharing, mutual interest, decision-making participation, and stakeholder interest alignment is critical for organisational success. This finding holds relevance for developing a as stakeholder engagement is a key dimension of effective communication integration.

The stakeholder approach potentially enhances stakeholder engagement within an integrated communication strategy. Having examined the nature of stakeholder theory, the next sections explore normative, descriptive, and instrumental stakeholder theories as distinct theoretical perspectives.

3.4.2 Stakeholder theories

Scholars recognise three primary approaches to stakeholder theory: normative, descriptive, and instrumental (Barquet *et al.* 2022; Bridoux & Stoelhorst 2022; Hörisch *et al.* 2014; Lewis 2007; Pesqueux & Damak-Ayadi 2005). According to Scherer and Patzer (2011), these three approaches are the most frequently cited stakeholder theories in the literature. Each perspective offers a distinct analytical lens: normative theory prescribes ethical standards; descriptive theory explains managerial practices; and instrumental theory links stakeholder management to organisational performance (Bridoux & Stoelhorst 2022). Next, each theoretical perspective is explored in greater depth.

3.4.3 Normative stakeholder theory

Normative stakeholder theory focuses on ethical principles in organisational conduct. Normative theory has an ethical foundation that acknowledges that stakeholders are people with legitimate interests in procedural and substantive aspects of the organisation (Patzner, Voegtlin & Scherer 2018). Pesqueux and Damak-Ayadi (2007:7) note that normative theory “emphasises the ethical obligations a firm face, and how it can satisfy them without denying its interest in achieving economic success”. This approach explores how stakeholders and institutions can mutually support each other’s objectives (Pesqueux & Damak-Ayadi 2007).

The normative perspective offers compelling solutions to ethically sound management challenges and organisational accountability. In investor-owned organisations, stakeholder management implemented through ethical principles rather than potential payoffs illustrates the moral foundation of normative stakeholder theory (Hörisch *et al.* 2014; Pesqueux & Damak-Ayadi 2007; Phillips & Wicks 2005; Scherer & Patzer 2011; Harrison, Felps & Jones 2018). Incorporating ethical considerations based on normative stakeholder theory strengthened the development of an integrated communication framework.

Normative stakeholder theory contributes a critical ethical dimension to stakeholder management, highlighting organisational responsibilities that extend beyond legal compliance or profit maximisation. This emphasis on ethics creates important connections with integrated communication principles, particularly transparency, authenticity, and organisational accountability. Any integrated communication framework must consider these normative dimensions to establish theoretically sound foundations for stakeholder interactions.

3.4.4 Descriptive stakeholder theory

Descriptive stakeholder theory provides empirical insights into organisation–stakeholder relationships. Scherer and Patzer (2011:6) explain that “in its descriptive form the stakeholder theory describes the corporation as a nexus of heterogeneous interests that are ascribed an intrinsic value”. Pesqueux and Damak-Ayadi (2007) note that descriptive stakeholder theory characterises both organisational and stakeholder behaviours and attributes. Flak and Rose (2005:646) describe stakeholder theory as

“a set of management propositions, dependent on descriptive theoretical models which can be used to analyse stakeholder situations”.

Consistent with these perspectives, descriptive stakeholder theory examines each stakeholder group's unique attributes and characteristics. Incorporating this approach may prove beneficial when assessing different stakeholders' distinctive characteristics and considering these characteristics while developing an integrated communication strategy.

According to Pesqueux and Damak-Ayadi (2007), the descriptive approach suggests each organisation has unique value propositions essential for promoting cooperation, collaboration, and competition. Organisations must address stakeholder concerns and expectations to justify their behaviour, objectives, and decision-making processes. Stakeholder involvement in decision making enables an organisation to develop a deeper understanding of stakeholder needs and concerns, facilitating more effective and informed decisions aligned with all parties' goals. This approach potentially builds stronger organisation–stakeholder relationships while fostering a culture of collaboration and transparency. However, Scherer and Patzer (2011) suggest further research is needed to determine the extent of societal integration of corporate behaviour.

Descriptive stakeholder theory emphasises each organisation's uniqueness regarding value propositions, with each playing central roles in cooperation, collaboration, and competition (Pesqueux & Damak-Ayadi 2007). Stakeholders are important throughout organisational lifecycles, making consideration of each stakeholder's significance and organisational impact essential (Harrison, Felps & Jones 2018; Hörisch *et al.* 2014; Pesqueux & Damak-Ayadi 2007; Scherer & Patzer 2011).

For developing an integrated communication framework ty, categorising stakeholders proves beneficial for strengthening collaboration, cooperation, and support. This descriptive approach provides critical insights into stakeholder diversity that must inform any integrated communication strategy attempting to coordinate messaging across different stakeholder groups.

3.4.5 Instrumental stakeholder theory

Instrumental stakeholder theory examines relationships between stakeholder

management approaches and organisational outcomes. According to Harrison *et al.* (2018), this theory suggests highly ethical relationships with stakeholders yield performance benefits characterised by high trust, cooperation, and information-sharing levels. They propose that stakeholders can be characterised by three attributes: (a) power (a stakeholder's capacity to influence); (b) legitimacy (a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of a stakeholder are desirable, proper, or appropriate); and (c) urgency (the extent to which a stakeholder's claims or concerns are time sensitive, pressing, or critical to the stakeholder) (Harrison *et al.* 2018). Lewis (2007) and Pesqueux and Damak-Ayadi (2007) agree that, when organisations maintain relationships with stakeholder groups, processes and outcomes can affect society. This suggests stakeholder relationship outcomes become predictable when specific behaviours are adopted, making instrumental theory dependent on ethical behaviour implementation. Organisations that implement stakeholder management potentially become more sustainable, profitable, and expansive. Scherer and Patzer (2011) support this perspective and suggest a symbiotic relationship between stakeholder management and corporate performance. Furthermore, Scherer and Patzer (2011:5) argue that instrumental stakeholder theory "proposes stakeholder-oriented answers as to how managers should meet specific objectives, which may or may not have ethical elements". According to Donaldson and Preston (1995:67), this theory is prescriptive, as it "justifies the stakeholder perspective in contrast to the traditional shareholder view with regard to long-term monetary payoff". This necessitates investigating cause-and-effect relationships to explain economic performance and prescribe enhanced organisational performance approaches. These arguments suggest instrumental stakeholder theory strengthens, sustains, and expands organisations when relationships between organisations and the public are well-maintained. However, organisations must ensure stakeholders do not dictate organisational actions to maintain ethical compliance. As this study aimed to propose an integrated communication framework, instrumental stakeholder theory's focus on strengthening and sustaining organisational stakeholder relationships offered valuable insights. Table 3.1 summarises key characteristics of these three approaches to stakeholder theory.

Table 1.3: Normative, descriptive, and instrumental approaches to stakeholder theory

Normative stakeholder theory	Descriptive stakeholder theory	Instrumental stakeholder theory
Acknowledges that individuals have legitimate interests in an organisation's procedures and substance. Ethical considerations are at the heart of the approach.	Describes an organisation's value, identity, purpose, stakeholder approach, and management style.	Considers the performance consequences for organisations of highly ethical relationships with stakeholders, characterised by high levels of trust, cooperation, and information sharing.
Provides resounding solutions to the problems of ethically sound management and its spectrum of accountability.	Describes the characteristics and behaviours of both the organisation and the target stakeholders.	Effects of stakeholder management on the achievement of corporate objectives.
Includes mutual support between the stakeholders and the institution, which supports the objectives of both institutions.	It can be applied to analyse stakeholder situations and consider the unique attributes and characteristics of each stakeholder group.	It is a symbiotic relationship between stakeholder management and corporate performance.
Discusses the purpose of business and the moral reasoning behind stakeholder theory.	Affirms that each organisation is unique as it relates to its value propositions and that each is central to cooperation, collaboration, and competition. Supports involving stakeholders in decision making. Organisations must address stakeholder issues and expectations to justify their actions and choices. They should foster teamwork, partnership, and competition while recognising their unique value.	Helps managers reach their goals by focusing on stakeholders. It is the process of studying cause-and-effect relationships to improve performance.

Sources: Flak and Rose (2005), Hörisch *et al.* (2014), Lewis (2007), Pesqueux and Damak-Ayadi (2007), Phillips and Wicks (2005), Scherer and Patzer (2011), Harrison *et al.* (2018)

The comparison in the above table reveals how each theoretical perspective addresses different aspects of stakeholder relationships. Normative stakeholder theory emphasises ethical dimensions of stakeholder collaboration. Descriptive theory highlights the importance of engaging each stakeholder at appropriate points throughout the organisation's lifecycle. Instrumental stakeholder theory suggests that maintaining positive relationships between organisations and their stakeholders potentially strengthens, sustains, and expands the organisation (Hörisch *et al.* 2014; Pesqueux & Damak-Ayadi 2007; Scherer & Patzer 2011; Harrison *et al.* 2018). Together, these theoretical perspectives offer complementary insights into stakeholder management. Normative theory provides ethical foundations; descriptive

theory offers analytical frameworks for understanding stakeholder characteristics; and instrumental theory connects stakeholder management practices with organisational outcomes. This multifaceted theoretical landscape informed the development of a comprehensive integrated communication framework that addresses ethical considerations, acknowledges stakeholder diversity, and recognises performance implications of stakeholder relationships.

Stakeholder theory has undergone significant refinement since Freeman's (1984) work. Contemporary scholars advance more nuanced understandings of stakeholder relationships that prove particularly relevant for public sector applications. Valentinov *et al.* (2018) reconceptualise stakeholder relationships as complex adaptive systems where communication reduces environmental uncertainty and maintains organisational legitimacy. This systems approach resonates with postcolonial governance challenges where historical power imbalances create ongoing uncertainty in stakeholder relationships. Freeman *et al.*'s (2018) exploration of stakeholder theory tensions showed how contemporary applications must address paradoxes between efficiency and inclusion, standardisation and responsiveness, and global frameworks and local contexts. These tensions assume particular significance in South African water governance where constitutional imperatives for inclusive participation must be balanced against operational efficiency requirements. Harrison *et al.*'s (2019) instrumental stakeholder theory developments indicate how ethical relationship-building approaches achieve bottom-line objectives through trust-based communication systems, directly challenging assumptions that ethical stakeholder engagement compromises organisational effectiveness. This theoretical grounding informs the proposed framework by clarifying who counts as a stakeholder and why stakeholder engagement matters.

Despite the conceptual value of stakeholder theory, scholarly critique has identified important limitations. The following section examines critiques of stakeholder theory to provide a balanced theoretical assessment.

3.4.6 Critique of stakeholder theory

Since its inception, stakeholder theory has faced persistent criticism, concerns, and challenges. Organisations often perceive the theory as an attempt to shift focus away

from maximising shareholder profits (Keremidchiev 2021). Analyses by Ambler and Wilson (1995), Jensen (2002), Mansell (2013), and Miles (2017) highlight several theoretical challenges that warrant consideration.

Various scholars note difficulties in accurately identifying and categorising stakeholders (Harrison *et al.* 2015; Tullberg 2013). This presents organisational challenges, as stakeholder databases may inaccurately reflect actual stakeholder compositions, potentially compromising communication, messaging, and approaches. Additionally, stakeholders may pursue different commercial objectives, creating confusion regarding the purpose of the theory. This challenge emerges because stakeholders frequently maintain conflicting agendas that fail to align with organisational interests, resulting in limited shared interest concerning specific issues. Prioritising societal success over business success may also prove counterproductive in some contexts. However, Engster (2011) contends that stakeholder theory imposes ethical obligations on businesses to consider the interests and address the needs of all individuals and groups affected by their policies and operations, including employees, consumers, suppliers, local communities, and other relevant parties.

Some scholars note difficulties in measuring stakeholder involvement when considering human and social variables (Tullberg 2013). Nevertheless, Harrison and Wicks (2013) argue that stakeholder theory provides a strong moral foundation, informing other organisational approaches like corporate social responsibility. They clarify that stakeholder theory was not developed to advocate for societal interests, nor to build value within entire economies, except insofar as organisations creating more value for themselves and their stakeholders inherently advancing societal interests.

Harrison and Wicks (2013) further suggest the theory potentially grants rights to non-contributing or non-participating individuals, possibly leading to distorted wealth creation and future business performance damage. Despite these limitations, stakeholder theory is a valuable development in classical management thinking, though acknowledging its constraints remains essential (Stoelhorst & Vishwanathan 2024).

These critiques highlighted important considerations for developing an integrated communication framework for the DWS. Issues concerning stakeholder identification,

competing interests, measurement challenges, and potential unintended consequences informed the integrated communication framework development to ensure practical applicability and theoretical soundness. The following section explores stakeholder relationship management to demonstrate how organisations practically manage stakeholder relationships.

3.4.7 Stakeholder relationship management

Stakeholder relationship management (SRM) involves ethically and efficiently managing organisational relationships with stakeholders (Ledingham 2015). This approach focuses on identifying common interests and shared objectives to achieve mutual understanding and benefit over time. Effective relationship management requires collaboration between organisations and stakeholders, both parties must establish trust and act in good faith to achieve success, even when benefits are unevenly distributed (Ledingham 2015).

The stakeholder approach recognises that organisations operate within complex networks of interdependent relationships involving other organisations and stakeholders (Meyer 2017). Ensuring these relationships remain sustainable and mutually beneficial requires considering and balancing the needs of all stakeholders who can affect or be affected by the organisation. This suggests stakeholders are interdependent, and meeting their needs benefits all parties involved. According to Meintjes (2012), SRM focuses on building relationships through stakeholder communication and involves identifying, categorising, and prioritising stakeholders. Consequently, stakeholder thinking has gained widespread acceptance across various domains, including local government and labour unions (Meintjes 2012; Vracheva & Mason 2015).

This SRM perspective connects directly to integrated communication principles discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.3. Both approaches emphasise coordination, relationship building, and strategic alignment across different organisational dimensions. These conceptual connections informed the integrated communication framework discussed later in this chapter, particularly regarding mechanisms for coordinating stakeholder communication.

Understanding how organisations analyse and categorise stakeholders becomes

essential. This relationship based view becomes central in the proposed framework because the DWS's communication challenges are not only informational but also relational. The following section examines stakeholder analysis and categorisation approaches.

3.4.8 Stakeholder analysis and categorisation

Stakeholder analysis aims to identify relevant stakeholders (Keremidchiev 2021). Welch and Jackson (2007) categorise stakeholders into internal and external groups, suggesting organisations should consider employees as internal stakeholders, while external stakeholders comprise individuals or organisations with vested interests that operate outside organisational boundaries. Ngcobo (2016) concurs, defining organisational stakeholders as those maintaining relationships with the organisation, whether internal or external. Internal stakeholders include employees at all levels, whereas external stakeholders encompass suppliers, community members, customers, media, and various government levels (Ngcobo 2016).

Internal stakeholders have invested in organisational identity and may hold positive or negative organisational perceptions (Meintjies 2012). Providing these stakeholders with strategic direction potentially enhances their understanding of organisational motivations and fosters partnerships (Meintjies 2012). Interestingly, Ngcobo's (2016) research showed that internal stakeholders often depend on external media for organisational information because of greater external than internal communication message volumes.

Amaeshi, Osuji and Nnodim (2008) propose six primary stakeholder categories: employees, shareholders, consumers, government, community, and environment. Additional classifications include suppliers, trade unions, business partners, and competitors (Amaeshi *et al.* 2008). Miles (2017) notes that stakeholders include shareholders, executives, employees, unions, creditors, suppliers, clients, local governments, and state entities. Flak and Rose (2005) suggest classifying stakeholders by dividing them into compatible and incompatible groups, which would help managers determine how stakeholder groups potentially influence the organisation and address groups with different characteristics. Podnar and Jancic (2006) propose an alternative categorisation approach: distinguishing between

primary and secondary stakeholders. Primary stakeholders include communities, employees, partners, and suppliers, whereas secondary stakeholders encompass academic and civic institutions, media, and lobby groups (Podnar & Jancic 2006).

These stakeholder analysis and categorisation approaches offered valuable insights for developing an integrated communication framework for the DWS. Understanding stakeholder distinctions, relationships, and characteristics enables more targeted and effective communication strategies that acknowledge diverse stakeholder needs and expectations. The proposed integrated communication presented next incorporates these stakeholder analysis principles together with integrated communication concepts.

It is important to note that the categories of primary and secondary stakeholders do not map neatly onto the distinction between internal and external stakeholders. A primary stakeholder is one whose continued participation is essential to the organisation's functioning. This may include employees (internal) and certain community groups (external). A secondary stakeholder is not directly involved in the organisation's operations but can significantly affect its reputation and legitimacy. These may include civil society organisations, media bodies, and advocacy groups. The distinction matters because internal and external stakeholders within the same primary category may have substantially different communication needs. Conflating these groupings risks designing communication strategies that do not adequately address the specific concerns of external parties. This study focuses specifically on the communication needs of external stakeholders, both primary and secondary, in their relationship with the DWS.

The distinction between primary and secondary stakeholder groups does not map directly onto the internal and external stakeholder distinction. Both internal stakeholders (employees) and external stakeholders (communities, NGOs) may fall within the primary group, yet their communication needs differ substantially. Secondary stakeholders, while not directly involved in day-to-day operations, can exercise indirect influence through reputation, advocacy, compliance pressure, or public opinion. This overlap between internal/external and primary/secondary categories is particularly relevant in the DWS context, where external stakeholders such as municipalities and water boards hold primary status due to constitutional co-

governance obligations, while civil society organisations may function as secondary but highly influential stakeholders. The integrated communication framework in Chapter 6 must account for this layered categorisation.

3.5 PROPOSED INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

This section proposes an integrated communication framework drawing from the literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3. The framework synthesises elements from the discussion in Chapter 2 on integrated communication and stakeholder theory in this chapter, creating a comprehensive conceptual foundation for examining stakeholder communication. The theoretical framework incorporates several key components: vertical and horizontal integration, strategic drivers for integrated communication, and integrated communication models discussed in Section 2.3.3. The theoretical framework recommends integration between the organisation, its stakeholders, and the environment. Furthermore, this theory-based framework applies normative, descriptive, and instrumental stakeholder theories. It proposes ethical partnerships with stakeholders by addressing their needs and consulting them on strategic organisational planning. The theoretical framework also proposes stakeholder analysis, categorisation, and engagement approaches.

Degenaar (2021:247) claims that “increased interactivity and involvement with stakeholders are key to stakeholder integration and relationship-building”. This highlights the importance of developing a theoretical framework towards an integrated communication stakeholder management strategy. This theoretical framework contributes to existing strategic integrated communication literature and will undergo empirical testing for refinement.

The following subsections explore the theoretical foundations and practical implications of each proposed framework component in detail.

3.5.1 A vertical and horizontal communication coordination approach

The first element of the proposed theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy involves vertical and horizontal communication coordination within the organisation. Various scholars suggest that integrated communication requires free communication flow between departments (horizontal) and different

managerial levels (vertical), including top-down and bottom-up communication (Degenaar *et al.* 2022; Smith 2012; Niemann-Struweg & Globler 2011; Niemann 2005). As noted earlier, organisations need horizontal communication flow to enable integration of knowledge and information sharing (sections 2.3 and 2.4.1). Vertical communication should ensure ongoing participation by all employees to validate organisational strategic intent.

Integrated communication efficiently coordinates organisational communication functions through top-down, bottom-up, and lateral integration. This coordination ranges from message alignment to cross-functional collaboration (Degenaar *et al.* 2022). Coordinated discourse with diverse internal and external audiences addresses integrated communication. This process extends beyond communication departments to involve approaches shared across the whole organisation (Vos & Schoemaker 2011). Ngcobo (2016) argues that organisations must adopt integrated communication approaches to facilitate effective communication with both internal and external stakeholders.

Smith (2012) contends that ensuring integrated communication distribution through organisational channels to target audiences requires careful management by employees. This communication process necessitates continuous communication and organisational synergy. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC 2013) defines synergy as the “interaction or cooperation of two or more organisations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects”. Integrated communication suggests involving stakeholders in organisational operations and management to ensure participation (Christensen, Firat & Torp 2007). Additionally, integrating modern, interactive digital communication platforms for message distribution promotes sustainability. This process involves ongoing dialogue, innovation, understanding stakeholder and customer perspectives, emotional connections, and strategic communication solution using tangible and intangible assets through knowledge management (Barker 2013).

Research by Sriram and Maheswari (2013) showed that new integrated communication strategies improved messaging to stakeholders. Their intensive integrated communication strategy – marketing targeting various groups and levels – successfully raised awareness and drove sanitary facility demand, demonstrating how

appropriate messages sent to key influencers and the public through suitable media can change stakeholder perceptions. Therefore, this study argues that a theoretically integrated communication framework within the stakeholder management context must include vertical and horizontal coordination elements. Establishing smooth, open communication systems between departments and management levels, including both top-down and bottom-up communication, is essential.

Vertical and horizontal integration link this approach to stakeholder theory's core focus on relationship management and stakeholder engagement. By assuring the free flow of information, both vertically and horizontally, an organisation stands a better chance of responding appropriately to a wide range of stakeholder needs and expectations. This also ensures coherent external messaging from the organisation, as information flows freely throughout the internal dimensions of the organisation before it is made public to its external stakeholders.

Although vertical and horizontal coordination focuses mainly on internal stakeholders, it is included in this study because external stakeholder engagement cannot be effective where internal communication is fragmented. Internal alignment across directorates and management levels enables the DWS to present consistent messages, respond coherently, and sustain credible relationships with external stakeholders.

For this reason, vertical and horizontal communication coordination is treated as an enabling internal mechanism within a framework that ultimately serves external stakeholder management.

3.5.2 Incorporating 10 strategic drivers of integrated communication

The second aspect of the proposed theoretical framework is embedding the 10 strategic drivers of integrated communication. This was incorporated as the findings of Ngcobo (2016) and Niemann (2005) showed that effective and successful relationships with customers and other stakeholders are crucial for organisational success.

The 10 strategic drivers of integrated communication can be grouped under corporate focus, processes, and infrastructure (Ngcobo 2016; Niemann 2005). To ensure integrated communication, organisations must have in place and continue to maintain

customer information databases, and must make strategic consistency, strategic purposeful interactivity, mission marketing, and zero-based planning a priority (Ngcobo 2016). Cross-functional planning and monitoring, as well as a focus on developing core competencies, retaining existing customers using databases and customer relationship management (CRM), and using and applying data-driven marketing as a tool are also essential aspects of these strategic drivers (Ngcobo 2016; Niemann 2005). These strategic drivers are crucial for embedding specific elements that would help with the actualisation of this theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy. They would help the relevant bodies or organisations develop an integrated communication approach, as they would have 10 specific components of the communication strategy at their disposal. The 10 strategic drivers incorporated into the new theoretical framework also ensure that the integrated approach to communication is implemented. These drivers cut across business, marketing, and communication management (Mebuge 2018). According to Sriram and Maheswari (2013), execution of a thorough and well-managed communication plan bridges communication perception gaps between persons, organisations, families, and communities.

Mebuge (2018) agrees that these 10 drivers help organisations establish long-term, profitable brand relationships. The drivers provide a rationale for designing and applying integrated communication models or blueprints for stakeholder management, helping organisations focus on key drivers for coherence, alignment, and effectiveness in communication with key stakeholder groups. The fact that there are many strategic drivers does not mean there is a need to include all 10 drivers in the design of an integrated communication model. It does, however, mean that awareness of these potential drivers may help organisations design more flexible models to suit their situational contexts and communication objectives. These strategic drivers can help organisations to develop specific, integrated communication approaches and practices, and to operationalise some of the core concepts of integrated communication, such as building two-way relationships and interactions with stakeholders; aligning messages and maintaining consistency; seeking stakeholder feedback; and continuously improving and adapting stakeholder communication practices in response to environmental changes. This may help close gaps in integrated communication theory and practice, such as the relative lack of explicit

value-creation roles (Sriram & Maheswari 2013). The drivers can also help focus on more tangible areas for practical integration. For example, some integrated communication models may prioritise technology drivers and, therefore, the adoption and utilisation of technology that enables real-time stakeholder engagement. Other integrated communication models may prioritise organisational competencies and seek to leverage existing strengths and resources to create and optimise communication practices.

In practice, these 10 strategic drivers could help organisations to identify and design paths that can help build stakeholder relationships and, in the longer term, achieve sustainable integrated communication practices that can address contemporary challenges. Organisations may not use or prioritise all 10 drivers in every situation. However, identifying drivers that are most relevant to their context can help design more effective communication blueprints. These can then be used to create stakeholder trust and accountability, and longer-term brand value and reputation (Mebuge 2018). A theoretical framework in the stakeholder management context benefits from considering these strategic drivers, which provide practical guidelines for developing and implementing integrated communication approaches by categorising them into corporate focus, corporate processes, and infrastructure.

The drivers inform integrated communication approach development by outlining a 10-step approach: relationship creation and nourishment; stakeholder focus; strategic consistency; purposive interactivity; mission marketing; zero-based planning; cross-functional management; core competencies; data-driven marketing; and integrated agency (section 3.2.4). This approach provides practical guidelines, workable criteria, and significant benefits for enhancing brand value. In this study, the ten strategic drivers are not adopted mechanically, rather they are used selectively to support the framework's strategic logic.

3.5.3 Integration between the organisation, its stakeholders and its environment

The third component of the proposed framework draws from existing communication integration models presented in Chapter 2 (Section 2.4). Earlier discussion explored integrated communication models, namely Hunter's (1997) model and Niemann's

(2005) strategic integrated communication implementation conceptual model.

Niemann's (2005) model emphasises business management approaches considering integrated communication financial implications (Degenaar *et al.* 2022; Mulder 2008; Niemann 2005). This model comprises two key principles: organisational strategic intent directs integrated communication, and the organisation must be constantly repositioned within its wider context. Additionally, the model proposes three elements of organisational integration: the organisation, its stakeholders, and its environment. Internal integration, including CEO/top management and a renaissance communicator, should precede external integration (Van Aardt & Holtzhausen 2022; Niemann-Struweg 2013). Maenetja (2009:55) explains that the Renaissance communicator concept builds on:

... [the] vision that the various specialised fields of communication and marketing need to work together in selecting the tools that promise the highest degree of synergies to be created so that the total communication effect can be greater than the sum of its parts.

However, the approach to accommodate organisational financial requirements for successful integrated communication implementation may have to be adjusted.

Given this study's aim to propose an integrated communication theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy, Niemann's (2005) strategic integrated communication implementation model provided appropriate guidance. The proposed theoretical framework can address gaps identified by Mulder (2008) in Niemann's (2005) communication model, including financial accountability, core competencies, data-driven marketing, and stakeholder-conscious employees.

This integration component explicitly connects organisational, stakeholder, and environmental dimensions, acknowledging their interdependence in communication contexts. By recognising these relationships, the theoretical framework creates a holistic approach to integrated communication that considers both internal and external factors affecting stakeholder interactions. This component also establishes meaningful connections to stakeholder theory's emphasis on organisation–stakeholder relationships and contextual factors influencing these relationships. This triadic integration is especially relevant to public sector communications because stakeholder engagement cannot be separated from broader environmental and

governance pressures.

3.5.4 Fostering ethical partnerships with stakeholders

The fourth element of the proposed theoretical framework builds on stakeholder theory, particularly normative, descriptive, and instrumental stakeholder theories. The framework recommends fostering ethical stakeholder partnerships by addressing stakeholder needs and consulting stakeholders on strategic organisational planning.

Stakeholder theory provides the theoretical framework's rationale, background, and context. Instrumental stakeholder theory prioritises ethical stakeholder relationships characterised by trust, cooperation, and information sharing (Barquet *et al.* 2022; Bridoux & Stoelhorst 2022; Harrison *et al.* 2018). Organisations can involve stakeholders in message development processes to promote growth (Degenaar *et al.* 2022; Niemann 2005). Meintjies (2012) found that managers tend to prioritise stakeholders who can impact organisational operations. These aspects of instrumental stakeholder theory guide the proposed theoretical framework.

The theoretical framework should analyse organisations and stakeholder needs. This approach identifies and addresses issues related to needs and shared interests between organisations and stakeholders (Hörisch *et al.* 2014; Pesqueux & Damak-Ayadi 2007). Additionally, developing integrated communication strategies in stakeholder management contexts can influence policy, strategy, education, awareness, and infrastructure development through soliciting stakeholder buy-in and support. This approach follows descriptive stakeholder theory, which highlights addressing stakeholder concerns and expectations in organisational decision-making objectives (Barquet *et al.* 2022; Bridoux & Stoelhorst 2022; Pesqueux & Damak-Ayadi 2007).

This ethical partnership component establishes an important normative foundation for the theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy, emphasising ethical considerations in stakeholder relationships. By incorporating these ethical dimensions, the framework acknowledges the moral aspects of stakeholder theory while providing practical guidance for building ethical stakeholder partnerships. This component links with normative stakeholder theory's emphasis on ethical obligations and mutual benefit in organisation-stakeholder relationships. Ethical partnerships

require more than consultation, they require reciprocity, transparency and sustained responsiveness.

3.5.5 Analysis and categorisation of stakeholders

The fifth component of the proposed theoretical framework involves analysing and categorising organisational stakeholders. Welch and Jackson (2007) suggest organisations should analyse their situations and recognise external stakeholders to better respond to external pressures. Brown and Forster (2013) suggest that involving stakeholders in strategic planning helps align key events and promotes mutual support and collaboration.

Phillips and Wicks (2005) postulate that publicly owned corporations prioritise their stakeholders. However, Meintjies (2012) emphasises that collaborating with diverse groups can challenge organisations. KroczeK, Mweetwa and Van Stam's (2013) study revealed that involving community groups leads to community acceptance, awareness, and ICT service adoption. The proposed theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy prioritises highly involved stakeholders and uses the term "stakeholder" instead of "public" to align with existing literature presented in this study.

To ensure message consistency, the proposed theoretical and integrated communication strategy must help identify primary and secondary stakeholders. Implementing a theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy allows messages to remain consistent, clear, and unified, thus avoiding fragmented communication. A theoretical framework towards integrated communication within the stakeholder management context must include stakeholder identification and analysis elements. This is crucial for enhancing stakeholder involvement, potentially strengthening stakeholder acceptance, awareness, and organisational policy compliance.

This stakeholder analysis component provides practical mechanisms for identifying, categorising, and prioritising stakeholders based on their characteristics and relationships with the organisation. By incorporating these analytical approaches, the framework enables more targeted and effective communication strategies that acknowledge stakeholder diversity. This component connects to descriptive

stakeholder theory's emphasis on understanding stakeholder characteristics and instrumental theory's focus on relationship management (section 3.4.7).

3.5.6 Stakeholder engagement

The sixth component of the theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy in stakeholder management contexts involves stakeholder engagement. Jeffrey (2009) describes stakeholder engagement as processes enabling groups that can influence or be impacted by organisational goals to provide feedback and contribute to decision-making processes affecting them. In contemporary society, stakeholders may eventually demand consultation if not proactively engaged. Based on Niemann's (2005) integrated communication model, stakeholder engagement proves essential for the success of the strategic management process.

Various global lobby groups and organisations advocate for stakeholder engagement because of its potential to enhance accountability and corporate credibility and build stakeholder trust (Meintjies 2012). Moreover, Keremidchiev (2021) believes that organisations comprise specialised assets and people, creating complex structures that cannot be duplicated, emphasising their value. Additionally, effective stakeholder engagement requires organisations to listen to stakeholder concerns, discuss issues with them, and remain open to adjusting goals and procedures based on stakeholder input (Jeffrey 2009).

Keremidchiev (2021) emphasises considering all stakeholder interests, not just those within the organisation, when managing stakeholders. This highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement as a critical component of the proposed theoretical framework and integrated communication strategy within stakeholder management contexts. Stakeholder relationship management involves prioritising and communicating with stakeholders to build strong relationships (Meintjies 2012). However, organisations often face accusations of superficial engagement that fails to consider stakeholder viewpoints (Keremidchiev 2021). Stakeholder engagement must be incorporated into any framework using integrated approaches to stakeholder management because engaging stakeholders proves crucial for all types of organisations, including businesses, public institutions, and civil society groups

(Jeffrey 2009). Stakeholder engagement is therefore treated here as a practical process of dialogue, responsiveness, and relationship maintenance.

Therefore, it is argued that a theoretical framework for integrated communication within stakeholder management contexts must focus on stakeholder engagement because of its potential to enhance accountability and corporate credibility and build stakeholder trust. This stakeholder engagement component provides mechanisms for involving stakeholders in organisational processes and decision-making. By incorporating engagement approaches, the theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy facilitates two-way communication and relationship building that acknowledge stakeholder perspectives and contributions. This component connects to all three stakeholder theory perspectives: normative (ethical engagement); descriptive (understanding engagement processes); and instrumental (engagement outcomes). Table 3.4 below summarises the six components of the proposed theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy.

Table 1.4: Components of the proposed theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy in the context of stakeholder management

Components	Proposed actions
1. Vertical and horizontal integration	• Establish vertical free flow of communication between the different managerial levels – top-down and bottom-up communication. • Support horizontal free flow of communication to enable and integrate the sharing of knowledge and information.
2. Incorporating the 10 strategic drivers for communication integration	• Create and nourish relationships • Foster a stakeholder focus • Establish strategic consistency • Consider purposive interactivity • Aim for mission marketing • Emphasise zero-based planning • Align cross-functional management • Identify core competencies • Involve data-driven marketing • Establish an integrated agency
3. Integration between the organisation, stakeholders, and the environment	• Manage internal integration, including top management and the Renaissance Communicator. • Aim for external integration. • Consider financial accountability, core competencies, data-driven marketing, and stakeholder-conscious employees.

4. Fostering ethical partnerships with stakeholders	• Prioritise ethical relationships with stakeholders, characterised by trust, cooperation, and information sharing. • Consider analysing an organisation and its stakeholders' needs. • Address stakeholder concerns and expectations in organisational decision-making objectives.
5. Analysing and categorising stakeholders	• Identify and categorise primary and secondary stakeholders. • Analyse stakeholder communication needs.
6. Stakeholder engagement	• Enhance accountability and corporate credibility and build trust among stakeholders.

Together, these six components form the proposed theoretical framework for integrated communication in stakeholder management. Each component addresses a different aspect of stakeholder communication while remaining rooted in both integrated communication and stakeholder theory perspectives. This proposed theoretical framework can be used as a basis for discussion and analysis of how organisations can coordinate their communication across stakeholders and build relationships with them, considering ethical and mutually beneficial principles.

3.6 INTEGRATED THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS

The convergence of contemporary stakeholder theory developments with integrated communication scholarship creates opportunities for developing theoretically sophisticated frameworks that address postcolonial public sector communication challenges. Patzer *et al.*'s (2018) work on normative stakeholder engagement provides foundations for understanding how authentic dialogue can be institutionalised within complex governance systems. Rose *et al.*'s (2018) e-government stakeholder framework demonstrates how traditional stakeholder categorisations require reconceptualisation when applied to democratic governance contexts where citizens occupy multiple stakeholder roles. In the context of the DWS, this theoretical synthesis suggests that effective integrated communication requires simultaneous attention to Freeman's (1984) foundational stakeholder identification processes, Niemann's (2005) systematic communication coordination mechanisms, and contemporary insights about power dynamics, cultural responsiveness, and democratic accountability that characterise post-apartheid South African governance

environments. Taken together, the literature supports a framework that combines stakeholder identification, ethical engagement, internal coordination, strategic drivers, and environmental awareness.

3.7 SUMMARY

This chapter critically examined integrated communication as a theoretical foundation for developing an integrated communication framework tailored to the DWS's stakeholder management needs. Commencing with foundational communication concepts, the review progressed through integrated communication definitions, benefits, limitations, strategic drivers, models, and public sector applications. Several key insights emerged from this analysis. First, integrated communication offers significant potential benefits for managing complex stakeholder relationships, particularly in the public sector context where accountability to diverse stakeholders is paramount. Second, existing models, like Hunter's and Niemann's models, provide valuable structural guidance but require adaptation to address the DWS's specific context, that is, South Africa's multicultural environment and constitutional imperatives regarding water access. Third, successful implementation requires addressing numerous challenges, from organisational structure and culture to resource limitations and measurement difficulties. Lastly, the six components of the proposed framework, as developed in this chapter, are revisited and refined in Chapter 6 in light of the empirical findings. The refined integrated communication framework developed from this theoretical foundation is presented in Chapter 6.

The next chapter focused on research methodology used in the study.

CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter details the methodological approach used to investigate the development of an integrated communication framework for the DWS. First, the research problem is revisited, followed by a discussion of the research paradigm and philosophical assumptions that underpinned the study. The research design, data collection methods, sampling procedures, and analytical techniques used to answer the research questions are then explained and justified. Each research sub-question informed specific methodological choices made throughout the study:

These research sub-questions are as follows:

- i) How does the DWS currently integrate its external stakeholder communication?
- ii) How do external stakeholders perceive their current engagements with the DWS?
- iii) What should a normative framework for integrated communication between the DWS and its external stakeholders constitute?

Issues of trustworthiness, data management and storage, and ethical considerations are addressed. Finally, the chapter concludes with a reflexivity statement addressing positionality within the water governance sector as provided in Section 4.8.6. This methodological framework enabled the systematic collection and analysis of empirical data needed to refine the integrated communication framework proposed in Chapter 6.

4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Muller (2018), water-related challenges are fundamentally human and organisational issues rather than mere engineering problems. To ensure effective implementation of the National Water Act (1998), the DWS must collaborate with relevant government departments, municipalities, the private sector, civil society, donor organisations, water users, and other sector stakeholders. However, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC 2014) highlighted the prevalence of complaints about water and wastewater management (Cullinan 2014). The lack of a

coherent, theoretically grounded communication framework and integrated communication strategy seems to exacerbate these challenges.

Although the literature offers various models for integrated communication (Barker 2013; Niemann 2005), their applicability to the South African water governance context remains unclear. The unique constitutional, legislative, and socio-economic factors that shape water management in the country suggest that imported frameworks might require substantial adaptation to address local realities effectively. This adaptation challenge is compounded by the paucity of empirical research on stakeholder communication within South African public sector contexts. Therefore, it was suggested that an integrated communication strategy be developed for stakeholder management, such a strategy would significantly enhance interactions between the DWS and its external stakeholders.

As noted in Chapter 1, the primary research problem was limited research on an integrated communication framework in the water management context. The inadequate management of stakeholder relationships has resulted in reputational damage, misaligned messaging, and reduced public trust in the DWS. These challenges have contributed to service delivery protests, negative media coverage, and stakeholder disengagement, undermining the DWS's ability to fulfil its mandate effectively. The research problem was encapsulated in the following question: How should the Department of Water and Sanitation integrate its external stakeholder engagement efforts? A qualitative single case study design was selected because it allowed for an in-depth examination of the DWS communication context.

4.3 SINGLE CASE STUDY RESEARCH DESIGN

This section briefly discusses the research paradigm, design and methodology employed in this study.

A research design is a comprehensive plan for conducting research (Yin 2014). It encompasses the entire research procedure, from conceptualising issues and formulating research questions to collecting, analysing, and interpreting data, culminating in report writing. A well-structured research design guides researchers in acquiring data relevant to stated research objectives (Creswell 2014). This occurs through five critical design elements: study questions, propositions (if any), units of

analysis, logic connecting data to concepts, and interpretive rules (Yin 2009).

A thematic analysis of the qualitative data was conducted to identify key components for the proposed integrated communication framework.

The research design demonstrates strong coherence between the interpretive paradigm, qualitative methodology, and data collection methods that are selected. Each methodological decision flowed logically from the theoretical framework established in Chapter 3, particularly stakeholder theory's emphasis on understanding diverse perspectives and communication theory's focus on meaningful exchange between organisations and the public. The single case design was appropriate because it enabled a focused examination of communication practices within the DWS.

4.3.1 Interpretivist paradigm

The interpretivist paradigm was adopted in this study. According to Maxwell (2016), a qualitative inquiry, including an interpretive approach, focuses on interpreting the meanings, purposes, and intentions behind people's actions and their interactions with others. Similarly, Garrett (2016) explains interpretive methods focus on understanding culturally produced and historically situated social interpretations. Interpretivism posits that reality is shaped by individual experiences, perspectives, beliefs, and cultural norms, as noted by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017).

Furthermore, Keyton (2017) and Rehman and Alharthi (2016) state that epistemology concerns knowledge; it addresses propositions of knowledge/truth. See Chapter 2, Sections 2.4.1 to 2.4.5 for further details on these aspects. This study focused on generating accurate knowledge regarding integrated communication strategies for engaging water sector stakeholders of the DWS.

The interpretivist paradigm recognises different realities based on individual experiences and interpretations. From this perspective, to manage conflicts and inequalities, one seeks diverse voices – including those of marginalised or less powerful stakeholders, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to empower them and ensure their perspectives receive proper consideration. In the study, in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to allow participants to express views freely. Researcher biases, which may influence data

collection and interpretation, were continuously examined through reflexivity. Member checking, enabling participants to review and comment on interpretations, was further employed.

4.3.2 Single case design

A single case study design was employed in this study. This approach is specifically structured to illuminate the complex communication dynamics between the DWS and its various external stakeholders. The design focused on understanding how communication processes function and how they might be improved through an integrated communication framework for DWS and its stakeholders.

A single case study is appropriate when the case represents a critical and revelatory instance of the phenomenon under investigation (Yin 2018). The DWS is uniquely positioned as South Africa's primary national water governance institution, making it an appropriate and sufficient case for developing an integrated communication framework for public sector stakeholder management.

A research design is a comprehensive plan for conducting a proposed study (Yin & Ebrary 2014). Qualitative research involves collecting words, data, images, or objects (Yin & Ebrary 2010). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), such research explores meanings that individuals or groups assign to social or human issues. This method encompasses question and methodology development, data gathering in the participants' environment, inductive data analysis, and result interpretation. It helps to effectively capture participant voices and experiences contextually and enables one to obtain a deeper understanding of a smaller sample's perspectives and realities (Fetters 2020). As Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) emphasise, qualitative methodologies align well with the interpretivist paradigm as they allow for contextually rich understanding of complex social phenomena through research participants lived experiences. A qualitative case study research design proves particularly suitable for investigating real-world issues in this study, providing insights into water and sanitation sector complexities. This design helped the study to understand communication challenges between the DWS and its stakeholders. Themes that emerged from the data were used to develop an integrated communication framework for DWS.

4.3.3 Qualitative research approach

Qualitative research examines the nature of phenomena, including qualities, manifestations, perspectives, and contexts, while excluding range, frequency, and objectively determined cause-effect relationships (Ugwu & Eze 2023). This approach involves gathering words, data, images, or objects (Yin & Ebrary 2010). Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that qualitative research explores meaning(s) that individuals or groups attach to social or human issues. It encompasses developing questions and methodologies, gathering data in participants' environment, conducting inductive data analysis, and interpreting results. This approach captures participant voices and experiences within context, allowing the study to gain from an in-depth perspective from a small sample's views and realities (Fetters 2020).

A qualitative approach was taken in this study because it provides much more than simply outlining research stages; it articulates research purpose, researcher roles, and data gathering and analysis methods. This methodology particularly suited exploration of real-world communication challenges and offered deeper insights into complexities within the water and sanitation sector. The approach facilitated understanding of communication issues between the DWS and stakeholders by using emergent themes to develop an integrated communication framework aimed at addressing actual communication needs rather than presumed deficiencies.

The nature of integrated communication, with its emphasis on relationship-building, dialogue, and mutual understanding, inherently demands qualitative inquiry. Quantitative approaches may identify communication frequency or channel usage but would overlook nuanced meanings, interpretations, and experiences that constitute effective communication from stakeholders' perspectives. By prioritising depth over breadth, the qualitative approach enables a rich understanding of communication dynamics that would remain invisible through statistical analysis alone. The qualitative approach was suitable because it enabled a deeper understanding of communication challenges in the water and sanitation sector.

4.4 POPULATION AND SAMPLING

4.4.1 Population

Population refers to the group or information that a study effectively addresses (Terre Blanche *et al.* 2006). Babbie (2013) concurs, defining population as the group from whom the study hopes to draw findings. The population for this study comprised DWS employees, who participated in online focus groups, and external stakeholders, who participated in interviews. This population delineation connects to the research questions by encompassing both those responsible for communication strategies and those receiving organisational communications.

4.4.2 Target population

A target population represents the entire source from which samples are drawn (Fetters 2020). Qualitative researchers typically focus on small population segments to gain in-depth knowledge about specific issues (Fetters 2020). Expanding target populations ensures the inclusion of varied relevant participant ranges, increasing perspective diversity and enhancing overall study approach effectiveness (Babbie 2013). The focus group target population comprised senior executives and managers in DWS communication directorates responsible for external stakeholder communication. These individuals suited the study because they developed, implemented, and oversaw DWS external stakeholder communication strategies. Their inclusion is linked to the study's aim of understanding current communication approaches and identifying potential improvements.

The target population for the interviews comprised individuals from corporate sectors, government-owned entities, local government institutions, water entities, NGOs, academia, advocacy groups, and community organisations. These participants represented external DWS stakeholders and gave valuable input regarding integrated communication strategies based on their organisational interactions. Their perspectives across different stakeholder categories ensured comprehensive understanding of communication needs and challenges from various viewpoints.

The target population for in-depth interviews were private sector employees, state-owned entities, municipalities, NGOs, and community organisations. These groups

were selected as DWS external stakeholders. The target population for focus groups comprised senior executives and managers from DWS communication units who were responsible for external stakeholder engagement.

4.4.3 Accessible population

The accessible population refers to subsets of the target population from whom data can be collected (Asiamah, Mensah & Oteng-Abayie 2017; Creswell 2014; Lindolf & Taylor 2011). The study employed Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample table to determine the accessible population size. In this study, the accessible population for focus groups were senior executives and managers working in DWS communication directorates. The accessible population for interviews comprised external DWS stakeholders. The 150-stakeholder population was accessible through their professional involvement in the South African water and sanitation sector, which provided identifiable organisational networks and contact pathways for participant recruitment (Asiamah *et al.* 2017). The accessible population for this study comprised stakeholders, including representatives from local government, private sector, civil society organisations, and state-owned entities. From this population, 10 external stakeholders participated in individual in-depth interviews, and 12 internal DWS managers participated in two focus group discussions (six participants per group).

Geographic accessibility was ensured, as participants resided in South Africa. They needed internet connectivity for online data collection methods, aligning with criterion sampling requirements for meaningful participation (Bloomberg & Volpe 2019). This population was appropriate given the study's focus on South African water sector communication dynamics and the need to develop locally appropriate communication strategies.

4.4.4 Sampling method

Sampling involves identifying portions of the overall population from whom data will be collected (Wagner *et al.* 2012). This process entails selecting smaller, relevant participant groups. Babbie (2014) adds that sampling constitutes the participant selection process. Sampling follows step-by-step procedures through which accessible subsets of the population are selected.

Babbie and Mouton (2011) identify two main sampling types: probability and non-probability. Probability samples employ random selection methods to minimise sampling error. This approach ensures equal selection probability for any unit and accurate population parameter representation by randomly selected units (Babbie & Mouton 2011; Bryman & Bell 2018; Taherdoost 2016). In the case of non-probability sampling, not every unit has an equal chance to be selected (Du Plooy 2009). Types of non-probability sampling are convenience, snowball, purposive, expert choice, mobile population, and quota sampling (Ayhan 2011). Non-probability sampling lacks random selection mechanisms, suggesting higher likelihood of some population units being selected than others (Bryman & Bell 2018). Yin and Ebrary (2010) note that non-probability sampling uses researcher expert judgment rather than statistical tools to identify suitable participants based on study parameters.

Purposive sampling involves researchers applying personal experiences and expertise in participant selection and is frequently done in qualitative research (Wagner *et al.* 2012). Qualitative researchers purposefully select information-rich cases to gain an in-depth understanding that would be unavailable through random sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe 2019). The study employed purposive sampling to select knowledgeable, experienced DWS managers for focus groups and DWS external stakeholders for interviews. This approach facilitated the acquisition of appropriate data through relevant participant engagement that addressed the research purpose and provided necessary insight and understanding to answer the research questions.

4.4.5 Justification for the selected sampling method

Research by Beaumont and Rao (2021) indicates increasing popularity of non-probability sampling techniques, like purposive sampling, because of their cost-effectiveness. Purposive sampling was employed in this study to select senior employees who had relevant knowledge and experience to contribute meaningfully to focus group discussions. Identifying appropriate stakeholders for individual interview participation was essential. Purposive sampling ensured study benefits from both a cost and time perspective and solicited the most pertinent participants for knowledge production. Moreover, purposive sampling enabled selection of participants in line with the research objectives, maintaining result integrity and reliability.

The purposive sampling approach particularly suited this study because of the specialised nature of water sector communication. Random sampling may include participants with insufficient knowledge of sector-specific communication challenges, while purposive sampling ensures participants have appropriate backgrounds to provide meaningful data. The approach also allowed for strategic selection of participants from different stakeholder categories in order to ensure broad representation of diverse perspectives.

4.4.6 Sample size

Sample size refers to the suitable number of units or participants needed to ensure data saturation within a reasonable timeframe (Bekele & Ago 2022). Mocănașu (2020:181) suggests that “adequacy of sample size is a key marker for the research’s quality”. However, authors’ opinions regarding suitable sample sizes vary, some prioritise data abundance over unit numbers, while others emphasise sample size to ensure dependable outcomes and credible research (Mocănașu 2020).

In qualitative research, data saturation is a key determinant of research validity (Mwita 2022). Some authors propose that data saturation could be reached with as few as nine interviews (Burmeister & Aitken 2012; Sarfo *et al.* 2021). The optimal focus group size typically ranges from six to eight participants, with two groups potentially providing thorough understanding of the topic of discussion (Hennink, Kaiser & Weber 2019). Therefore, this study included six participants per focus group, comprising managers employed in DWS’s communication directorate, thus a total of 12 focus group participants. The interview sample comprised 10 external DWS stakeholders.

This sample size balanced practical constraints with the need for data saturation. The chosen sample size reflected careful consideration of participant availability, during a climate crisis given the severe drought, government officials faced significant time constraints. The sample was sufficient to capture diverse perspectives and was manageable within the research timeframe. The combination of focus groups and interviews further strengthened the data by yielding both individual and group perspectives.

4.4.7 Participant recruitment

To access the participants, written permission from DWS leadership was sought and liaised with the communication and external stakeholders' directorates. Participants were selected from the DWS stakeholder database using purposive sampling. Formal invitations were sent by email detailing the study objectives, ethical clearance, and the time expectation for the interview (45 to 60 minutes) (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2019). A request to participate form was included in all initial communications (Appendix D). Appointments were scheduled through Microsoft Outlook, and participants were allowed to select convenient times.

Microsoft Teams was selected as the platform because of its security features, recording capabilities, and widespread adoption among government and corporate participants (Gray 2018). All interviews were conducted on agreed dates (see Table 5.1). Written consent was obtained via email before each session.

4.4.8 Online semi-structured interviews with external stakeholders

In this study, 10 online semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected key stakeholders from the government, private sector, NGOs, and academia. As per Bryman's (2016) recommendations on qualitative interviewing, an interview schedule with open-ended questions was used to explore stakeholders' communication experiences with the DWS.

Table 1.5: Online semi-structured interviews

Interview Date	Participant Sector
21 November 2024	Energy
26 November 2024	Academia and Research institutions
28 November 2024	Agriculture and mining
29 November 2024	Donor organisation and the private sector
9 December 2024	Private sector
10 December 2024	Non-government organisation

The demographics for the online interviews were as follows:

Table 1.6: Demographics of the online interview participants

Interviewee	Gender	Years of Experience	Sector
P1	Female	5	Donor Agency
P2	Male	30	NGO
P3	Male	25	Research institution
P4	Male	15	NGO
P5	Male	20	Mining and agriculture
P6	Female	18	Private sector
P7	Male	15	Private sector
P8	Male	25	Energy
P9	Male	30	Academic institution
P10	Male	15	Energy

The demographics of Focus Group 1 were as follows:

Table 1.7: Demographics of Focus Group 1

Participant group	Gender (M/F)	Years of experience	DWS Components
FG1-P1	Female	20	IGR & Sector Collaboration
FG1-P2	Female	22	Communications
FG1-P3	Female	18	Water Use Efficiency – Gauteng
FG1-P4	Male	21	Water Use Efficiency – Limpopo
FG1-P5	Female	18	Water Services Operational Capacity Support: Water Services Capacity Support
FG1-P6	Male	20	Provincial & Entity Governance and International Cooperation

The table below summarises the demographics of Focus Group 2.

Table 1.8: Demographics of Focus Group 2

Participant group	Gender (M/F)	Years of experience	DWS Components
FG2-P1	Male	7	National Hydrological Services
FG2-P2	Male	15	Raw Water Price Regulation
FG2-P3	Male	10	Water Service Regulation
FG2-P4	Female	10	Corporate Services
FG2-P5	Female	17	Communications
FG2-P6	Female	20	Communications

4.5 INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Criterion sampling is effective when all studied individuals represent people who are experiencing the same phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe 2019). Researchers must identify specific sample characteristics or criteria and select participants accordingly (Martínez-Mesa *et al.* 2016). Following this approach, the inclusion criteria for participation in the focus groups and interviews in this study were as follows:

- Participants worked as professionals in the water and sanitation sector.
- Participants had at least five years' experience in the water and sanitation sector.
- Participants had internet access, as the interviews and focus groups were conducted online.

For the interviews and focus group, the exclusion criteria for interviews were as follows:

- Individuals not actively involved in the water and sanitation sector.
- Individuals with less than five years' experience working in the water and sanitation sector.
- Individuals who lacked literacy and internet access.

These criteria ensured participants had sufficient experience and knowledge to provide informed views on communication practices within the water sector. The experience requirement particularly helped ensure that participants had observed multiple communication approaches and could offer insight into both successful and unsuccessful communication strategies.

4.6 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Data collection is the systematic process of gathering and evaluating relevant data to answer specific research questions (Kabir 2016). This section explains the data collection methods and instruments used in this study. The study involved two online focus groups with 12 DWS employees and in-depth online semi-structured interviews with 10 external stakeholders.

Qualitative data collection methods, like in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, offer several advantages. The study can benefit from gather

additional data, including body language and voice tone, during ongoing interviews, enhancing accuracy (Chand 2025). These methods provide unobtrusive approaches not solely relying on participant responses. Furthermore, qualitative data collection processes are flexible and aim to discover new knowledge (Queirós, Faria & Almeida 2017). Engaging experienced water and sanitation individuals yielded accurate, beneficial insights.

These methods directly connected to the research questions and objectives. Focus groups enabled exploration of communication practices from the perspective of those responsible for developing and implementing communication strategies. Individual interviews allowed external stakeholders to share their experiences without organisational pressures that have might inhibited honest feedback. Together, these methods provided complementary perspectives that illuminated the communication dynamics from both sides of the exchange.

The methods aligned with the interpretivist paradigm by allowing participants to share their subjective experiences and construction of meaning related to DWS communications. Rather than measuring predetermined variables, these approaches enabled the study to explore how the stakeholders experienced and interpreted communication processes, revealing insights that might have remained hidden had more structured approaches been used.

Each method of data collection used in this study is briefly discussed next.

4.6.1 Alignment between secondary research questions, interview questions, and theoretical foundations

The interview schedule used in this study was organised into six thematic sections, each designed to explore a component of the proposed integrated communication framework. Every section and its associated questions were developed with the secondary research questions (SRQs) in mind, and each question draws on an integrated communication frameworks that underpin this study: Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, Niemann's (2005) conceptual model for the implementation of strategic integrated communication, and Barker's (2013) integrated communication theory.

Table 4.5 sets out the alignment between the secondary research questions, the

interview questions, and the theoretical foundations of those questions. This transparency allows readers to assess whether the empirical design was coherent and purposefully grounded in theory (Creswell & Creswell 2018).

Table 1.9: Alignment between secondary research questions, interview questions, and theoretical foundations

INTERVIEW SECTION	SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION (SRQ)	ACTUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (APPENDIX H)	THEORETICAL FOUNDATION
Section 1: Identification and analysis of stakeholders	SRQ 1: How does the DWS currently integrate its external stakeholder communication? SRQ 3: What should a normative framework for integrated communication between the DWS and its external stakeholders constitute?	• Can you describe how you are identified as a stakeholder of the Department of Water and Sanitation? • From your perspective, what approaches could you suggest to enhance the Department's current efforts in identifying stakeholders? • In your opinion, what strategies would you recommend to strengthen the Department's efforts in analysing your communication needs as a stakeholder?	<i>Freeman (1984): Stakeholder identification who is a stakeholder and how should stakeholders be categorised and mapped.</i> <i>Niemann (2005): Stakeholder integration area understanding and responding to the specific communication needs of different stakeholder groups.</i>
Section 2: Stakeholder engagement	SRQ 1: How does external stakeholders perceive their current communication experiences with the DWS? SRQ 2: How do external stakeholders perceive their current engagement with the DWS?	• In your opinion, to what extent do you think stakeholder engagement is important in the water sector? • From your perspective, how does stakeholder engagement enhance accountability between your organisation and the Department? • How does stakeholder engagement enhance corporate credibility (the trustworthiness of the organisation) between your organisation and the Department?	<i>Freeman (1984): Stakeholder theory — building and maintaining productive relationships with stakeholders based on mutual trust and accountability.</i> <i>Niemann (2005): Interactivity integration two-way, symmetrical, purposeful, and personalised communication.</i>

Section 3: Fostering ethical partnerships with stakeholders	SRQ 2: How do external stakeholders perceive their current communication experiences with the DWS? SRQ 3: What normative framework for integrated communication between the DWS and its external stakeholders constitute?	• In your opinion, what do you feel makes a partnership ethical? • As a manager in the water sector, how would you describe cooperation between your organisation and the Department? • In your experience, how has your organisational decision-making been impacted by the Department's current partnership approach?	<i>Freeman (1984): Stakeholder theory — the moral dimension of stakeholder relationships; fairness, cooperation, and mutual benefit.</i> <i>Niemann (2005): Brand contact point integration messages and incentives, the 360-degree brand idea, and timing of communication.</i>
Section 4: Vertical and horizontal communication coordination	SRQ 1: How does the DWS currently integrate its external stakeholder communication? SRQ 2: How do external stakeholders perceive their current engagements with the DWS?	• Which particular platforms have you found to be helpful in promoting coordination of communications between the Department and your organisation? • Which specific platforms do you believe are useful for encouraging communication coordination among various sectors, such as social media, radio, newspapers, online newsletters and websites? • Within your sector, how would you characterise the degree of cooperation between the different stakeholders?	<i>Niemann (2005): Organisational integration area horizontal integration across departments and regions; vertical integration between management levels.</i> <i>Barker (2013): Integrated agency relationships and cross-functional management as strategic drivers.</i>
Section 5: Incorporating the ten strategic drivers of integrated communication	SRQ 1: How does the DWS currently integrate its external stakeholder communication? SRQ 3: What normative framework for integrated communication between the DWS and its external	• From your experience, how has the Department's strategic consistency in its messaging helped your organisation provide input on communication initiatives? • Can you share a situation where the core competencies (the capabilities, knowledge, skills and resources of the Department) helped with your organisational decision-making?	<i>Barker (2013): Ten strategic drivers specifically strategic consistency, core competencies, purposive interactivity, zero-based planning, and mission marketing.</i> <i>Niemann (2005): Strategic intent of the organisation as the driver of all</i>

	stakeholders constitute?	• What made this approach effective?	<i>integrated communication.</i>
Section 6: Integration between the organisation, stakeholders and the environment	SRQ 2: How do external stakeholders perceive their current engagements with the DWS? SRQ 4: What normative framework for integrated communication between the DWS and its external stakeholders constitute?	• In your view, does the current Department communication strategy take environmental factors and stakeholder concerns such as climate change, water security and water pollution into account? • In your experience, what are the primary benefits of fostering integration between organisations, stakeholders and the environment in the water sector? • Based on your experience, how does your organisation obtain information regarding important programmes like Water Use Efficiency, from all the different managerial levels in the Department of Water and Sanitation?	<i>Niemann (2005): Environmental integration area the economic, political and social environments within which the organisation operates.</i> <i>Freeman (1984): Stakeholder theory the organisation's obligation to consider the broader environmental and social concerns of its stakeholders.</i> <i>Barker (2013): Stakeholder focus and data-driven marketing as strategic drivers.</i>

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on the interview schedule in Appendix H, Freeman (1984), Niemann (2005), and Barker (2013).

The six sections of the interview schedule map directly onto the six components of the proposed integrated communication framework discussed in Chapters 3 and 6. Each component was derived from the integrated communication frameworks identified in the literature review, ensuring a clear methodological thread from theory through to data collection and into the final framework. Appendix H contains the full interview schedule, including the transitional statements that were used between sections to orientate participants and maintain the flow of the interview.

4.6.2 In-depth online semi-structured interviews

In-depth online semi-structured interviews were conducted. In qualitative research, semi-structured interviews prove highly effective for gathering detailed participant information while affording the study the necessary freedom to make adjustments because of their adaptable, flexible nature (Ruslin *et al.* 2022). Semi-structured

interviews involve the interviewer asking open-ended questions to participants (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik 2021). According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), the benefits of such interviews are that they foster participant interactivity, elicit personal accounts, explain complex processes, and facilitate cultural discovery.

A semi-structured interview schedule lists topics and questions interviewers ask participants. An interview schedule contains an opening, a body, and a conclusion (Bearman 2019). It is a tool researchers use when conducting interviews. These guides may be structured or unstructured and consist of questions or topics. A semi-structured interviews is popular a method that incorporates specific questions and follow-up questions alongside open-ended questions (Smulowitz 2017). In this study, the interview questions aligned with the research objectives, research questions, and the proposed an integrated communication framework. As the interview respondents were external stakeholders while the focus group participants were DWS managers, the nature of the interview questions differed slightly to ascertain the scope and detail of the existing communication strategy. An interview schedule was developed for each participant group to ensure a rigorous process. The interview schedule is attached to this thesis (see Appendix H).

4.6.3 Benefits of in-depth interviews

Qualitative data collection methods, like in-depth interviews, offer several advantages. Researchers can collect additional data, including body language and voice tone, during ongoing interviews, enhancing accuracy (Chand 2025). Additionally, these are accurate, unobtrusive methods and do not solely rely on participant responses. Furthermore, qualitative data collection processes exhibit flexibility and aim to discover new knowledge (Queirós *et al.* 2017). Engaging experienced water and sanitation individuals provided accurate, beneficial insights.

The interview approach allows for deeper exploration of sensitive topics that might remain undiscussed in group settings (Schuster *et al.* 2022). Stakeholders could hesitate to express criticism or negative experiences in focus groups, particularly if they depended on relationships with the DWS for their work. Thus, individual interviews created safer spaces for honest reflection on communication challenges and opportunities for improvement.

4.6.4 Limitations of in-depth interviews

Regarding disadvantages, Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) note that qualitative methods, like in-depth interviews, present limitations. Participants demonstrate different cooperation, articulation, and perception levels. Interviewing requires skill, and interviews reflect interviewer-interviewee interactions. This method faces criticism as power imbalances may arise as the research when the researcher initiates interviews, selects topics, asks questions, and determines the course of the conversation (Anyan 2013; Kaaristo 2022). To address these challenges, the reincorporated the following strategies (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl 2018):

- i) Carefully selected interviewers experienced in qualitative research techniques
- ii) Pre-tested the interview schedule to identify potentially problematic questions
- iii) Created a comfortable, non-threatening interview environment
- iv) Used open-ended questions that empowered participants to direct the conversation
- v) Engaged in active listening to follow participant leads while maintaining focus.

4.6.5 Online focus group discussions with internal stakeholders: DWS managers

In addition to the individual semi-structured interviews, two focus group discussions were also conducted with 12 internal stakeholders (DWS managers). The focus group discussions are a conversation-rich format that enables a dialogue where the participants respond to each other and build on their points (Bryman 2012). Each focus group comprised six DWS middle- and senior managers representing diverse perspectives. These sessions aimed to encourage interactive discussion and explore collective viewpoints on DWS communication practices (Krueger & Casey 2015), providing a deeper understanding of internal communication dynamics and collaboration methods with external stakeholders.

Focus groups were an apt choice for understanding the communication culture of the

organisation, as they helped to understand how such communication was conceptualised within the organisational setting (Renjith *et al.* 2021). The group interaction was useful in understanding unspoken rules and assumptions that informed how communication was done within the DWS, providing context to insights gained from the individual interviews.

Focus groups were scheduled for 90-minute sessions using Microsoft Teams. Participants selected appointment times through Microsoft Outlook. Discussions were moderated using a prepared discussion guide (see Appendix G), and participants were grouped according to sector similarity to encourage open dialogue among peers. Sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using the same coding methodology as the interviews.

4.6.6 Focus group discussions

Online focus group discussions were also conducted. Traynor (2015) defines a focus group as a qualitative research method involving groups brought together by the discuss and interact regarding specific topics.

Focus groups involve in-depth group interview methods, guided by moderators, exploring selected topics, and providing useful insights. They entail informal discussions among selected individuals about a specific topic. Selected participants often share interests or common characteristics (Gundumogula 2021). This study involved two online focus group discussions, comprising 12 DWS managers with shared communication experience and external stakeholder interaction experience.

To overcome logistical challenges and limited availability of DWS managers and water sector stakeholders, conducting focus group discussions via online platforms was the most viable option. The Microsoft Teams platform served as the focus group data collection platform. Microsoft Teams allows one to record discussions, which is an additional benefit. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) note that focus group sessions may involve notes or verbatim transcripts to document participant interactions. Focus groups foster dialogue, clarify complex interactions, extend findings, and yield richer participant responses.

The focus group approach particularly suits communication research because it reveals not only individual perspectives but also how communication practices are

negotiated and understood collectively within an organisation. The group dynamic often unearths tacit assumptions and shared understandings that might remain unexplored in individual interviews. This method aligned with the study's interest in understanding organisational communication culture and specific communication practices.

- ***Benefits of online focus groups***

Digital communication tools can facilitate discussion of sensitive or personal topics. These tools allow participants to choose convenient participation times and locations, increasing engagement likelihood. These tools enabled participants from wider geographic ranges, as participants needed not be physically proximate to the study location (Murukutla & Puri 2020). Additionally, digital data collection methods potentially lowered research costs (Murukutla & Puri 2020). The online format particularly benefited this study given the geographical distribution of participants across South Africa and the time constraints faced by senior officials. The approach allowed for greater participation than would have been possible with in-person focus groups, especially during an election period when government officials face significant scheduling challenges.

- ***Limitations of online focus groups***

Online focus groups have their own challenges. Participants must access required technology and receive proper training. In-person focus groups often require video recording, which some may find uncomfortable. Some participants may perceive online interactions as artificial, and technology failures, environmental disturbances, and fatigue may disrupt participation (McGrath *et al.* 2018). Online formats limit physical material presentation, and online focus groups typically run shorter than in-person sessions (Murukutla & Puri 2020).

To address these challenges, several strategies employed in this study:

- i) Provided technical support for participants unfamiliar with the platform
- ii) Scheduled sessions at times least likely to experience technical disruptions
- iii) Limited session length to reduce fatigue

- iv) Created opportunities for individual follow-up if technical issues prevented full participation
- v) Used visual aids designed specifically for online sharing.

4.7 DATA ANALYSIS

The data were obtained from online semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The semi-structured interview method was an effective tool to elicit in-depth data about participant perceptions in a conversational context that would allow for candid responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn 2019). The online nature of these methods allowed for ease of access to participants across South Africa's nine provinces and avoided travel-related expenses.

The methods and principles of thematic analysis were followed to prepare, organise, and work with the transcripts. Thematic analysis helps identify themes, codes, and salient features of information gathered, ensuring that the inferences and conclusions drawn from this information are grounded in research and a methodologically sound process. The following two sections expand on the data collection and analysis process to illustrate transparency and accuracy. The discussion then focuses on how various strengths and challenges identified in the data led to the conclusion of imperative action in developing an integrated communication and its external stakeholders. The data collection and analysis processes show transparency and precision.

Qualitative data analysis is an inductive process to identify patterns, themes, and relationships in textual data that reflect participant contexts and realities in real-world settings (Schutt 2022). Researchers employ reasoning, techniques, and tools to make sense of data. Qualitative research explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems. In this study, the data collected by means of semi-structured and focus groups interviews were analysed using thematic content analysis. This analytical approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm by focusing on meaning-making and patterns of experience rather than measuring predetermined variables. Using this approach, the key themes linked to the research questions were identified, specifically communication experiences, barriers, and potential framework elements.

4.7.1 Six steps of thematic analysis

The six-step process of thematic analysis, suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), was followed in this study.

- ***Step 1: Familiarising oneself with the data***

The first step involved becoming familiar with data through reading and re-reading. Thematic analysis requires a comprehensive reading and understanding of the data. Identifying key interview topics necessitates active listening and transcription. Each interview was recorded and transcribed promptly, with the Microsoft Teams transcription facility used to generate initial verbatim transcripts. Subsequently, all transcripts were reviewed multiple times to gain a thorough material understanding (Braun & Clarke 2006).

This immersive approach to data familiarisation ensured that subsequent analysis remained grounded in participants' actual experiences rather than in researcher preconceptions (Pearson, Myall, Darlington & Gibson 2025). The process allowed for the identification of subtle patterns and connections that might have been missed through a more cursory review. This stage particularly aligns with the interpretivist emphasis on understanding subjective experiences and meanings.

- ***Step 2: Generating initial codes***

The second step involves creating initial codes. These codes help identify data relevant to the research question(s) (Schutt 2022). Codes are descriptive labels that provide information relevant to the research questions and serve as the basis for theme development. Codes should be short yet descriptive of data, grouped together as they relate to research (Schutt 2022). Various techniques are employed during coding, such as taking text notes or identifying patterns using highlighters or coloured pens. Subsequently, data extracts exemplifying codes are compared with identified codes. In the study, data extracts from the interviews were compiled to create specific codes. All data underwent meticulous coding and matching with identified codes (Braun & Clarke 2006).

The coding process is directly connected with the theoretical framework by identifying both anticipated and emergent patterns related to stakeholder communication. Codes

addressed elements relevant to the theoretical framework for an integrated communication framework for the DWS, stakeholder theory concepts, and communication barriers identified in the literature. This approach ensured theoretical integration while remaining open to unexpected insights from the data.

- ***Step 3: Generating themes***

The third step involved generating themes by analysing codes and identifying common patterns, words, and phrases (Braun & Clarke 2006). Relevant data were collated to identify potential themes, which are broad information units consisting of several codes combined to form common ideas (Creswell 2014). Similar patterns were identified among codes that reflected relationships among themselves (Creswell 2014). After preliminary themes had been identified, they were reviewed to find ideas that fit together, potentially indicating elements contributing to an integrated communication framework DWS and its stakeholders.

The theme-generation process particularly focused on identifying connections between stakeholder experiences and communication practices that could inform framework development. The themes addressed not only challenges but also successful communication practices that could be expanded or formalised in an integrated communication approach. This orientation towards solutions rather than merely documenting problems aligned with the study's practical aim of developing an applicable theoretical framework and integrated communication strategy.

- ***Step 4: Reviewing themes***

The fourth step involved reviewing and assessing the theme's usefulness. Themes must be carefully evaluated within the entire research context to ascertain whether the data support them (Braun & Clarke 2006). When reviewing themes, all gathered data extracts for each theme are examined to ensure they create logical patterns that provide context for each theme (Babbie 2013). This review process ensures themes remain firmly grounded in participant experiences rather than researcher assumptions. The relationships between the themes was examined to identify potential organising structures for an integrated communication framework. By testing themes against the full dataset, the analysis-maintained credibility and authenticity.

- ***Step 5: Refining and naming themes***

The fifth step involved defining and naming themes by exploring their scope and focus and deciding on relevant names. During this stage, data is analysed extracts and arranges them in a logical, coherent manner with corresponding narratives (Braun & Clarke 2006). The primary objective is determining true theme meanings and identifying data elements best representing them. Working titles are assigned to each theme at this stage, providing readers with topic ideas (Braun and Clarke 2006). In this study, themes and subthemes were carefully examined to ensure they aligned with the research question(s). If necessary, theme names were modified to reflect data more accurately.

The naming process particularly focused on creating clear, memorable themes that could translate into framework elements. Names balance academic precision with practical utility, ensuring the resulting integrated communication framework remains accessible to practitioners while maintaining theoretical integrity.

- ***Step 6: Producing the report***

The final step involves merging analytic narratives, datasets, and contextualising the analysis in relation to existing literature. The research report should organise, describe, and interpret integrated communication (Braun & Clarke 2006). The primary goal of the report is to tell data stories and show theme relationships. The report aims to provide sufficient theme evidence, along with striking examples, to illustrate the main idea of the research (Braun & Clarke 2006). The ultimate analysis may provide succinct, logical, cohesive, engaging, non-repetitive narratives of stories illustrated by the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). The report should provide sufficient supportive data extracts and should do more than just summarise the data.

4.7.2 Qualitative data analysis software

Qualitative content analysis techniques were employed in this study. Rambaree (2013) suggests a qualitative data analysis method abbreviated as NCT (noticing, collecting, and thinking). This simple, logical method applies to any form of qualitative data analysis. Various methodologies such as thematic analysis, narrative analysis, and discourse analysis require discussion on how to proceed. In this study, MAXQDA 2022

(VERBI Software 2021), a qualitative data analysis software program, was used to conduct thematic analysis. MAXQDA 2024 was used from step 1 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process. First, verified transcripts were imported as primary documents and the memo function was used to record initial observations during data familiarisation. In step 2, the software facilitated systematic coding through its coding functionality, following Saldana's principles, that is, line-by-line coding of data extracts while maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and modifications throughout the process. MAXQDA's Code Relations Browser, Code Co-occurrence feature, and visual mapping tools supported steps 3 and 4 by enabling an exploration of thematic structures, identification of overlapping concepts, and refinement of theme boundaries before final theme definition and reporting. A full declaration of the research tools and AI-assisted writing support used in this study is provided in Appendix I.

4.8 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) suggest the following criteria for establishing trustworthiness in research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and triangulation. These concepts are discussed in Chapter 4 (section **Error! Reference source not found.**).

4.8.1 Credibility

Credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and triangulation are critical for establishing trustworthiness (Bloomberg & Volpe 2019).

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the research findings accurately reflect participants' experiences and perspectives, establishing confidence in the "truth value" of the inquiry (Tracey 2010). According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), if the research findings are accurate interpretations of participants' meanings and experiences within their specific contexts, credibility is demonstrated. In this study, ensured credibility by verifying participant statements collected through interviews and focus groups. Furthermore, an interview schedules and focus group guide were used. Participants' accounts were confirmed. Stahl and King (2020) describe this process as "member checking", which is when participants review transcribed data to ensure

accuracy. This practice helped improve credibility.

Interviewing external stakeholders and facilitating focus group discussions with DWS managers ensured triangulation (i.e., multiple sources of data on communication). The findings were compared, this contributed to trustworthiness. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, which involved the interviewees verifying the accuracy of the transcripts and that initial interpretations were accurate. Trustworthiness was also ensured through peer debriefing, which involved the supervisors regularly meeting with the researcher to review and discuss the study so as to ensure that the data analysis was rigorous, transparent, and logical. An audit trail in MAXQDA was retained.

Beyond these standard approaches, credibility was enhanced through transparency of researcher positionality and careful documentation of analytical processes. Credibility was also maintained by showing how interpretations connected with the data, even within the subjective interpretive framework. Credibility in interpretivist research stems from transparent processes of meaning-making and not from claims of objectivity.

4.8.2 Transferability

Transferability involves the applicability of the research findings to new settings. Generalisability means extending findings to circumstances, situations, populations, times, or settings other than those studied in the current research (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston 2013). To be considered transferable, researchers must provide detailed explanations of study locations and events. This helps readers evaluate whether findings apply to other situations, such as determining whether particular pedagogies can be implemented in other settings (Ma & Ma 2022).

The study revealed rich contextual information to enhance transferability, such as a description of the South African water sector context, the organisational context of the DWS, and specific stakeholder groups. This allows readers to judge whether the results are relevant to other public sector communication contexts. The study also provided information on the participants (water professionals), including their roles, experience, and organisation, which allows readers who may want to adopt the integrated communication framework to judge whether their contexts are similar. The

challenges, stakeholders, and the context in which they were situated, including specific constraints within the sector were well-documented during the data collection and analysis processes, providing sufficient context for readers to determine if the theoretical framework and integrated communication framework are relevant to water governance or public sector communication contexts.

The findings of this study can be generalised to the DWS for further development and implementation of integrated communication frameworks. While the findings are specific to the South African water sector, the principles and approaches identified in this study may be relevant to similar sectors or organisations that face similar communication challenges. The detailed description of the study context enables readers to assess potential transferability to their own settings.

4.8.3 Dependability

Dependability is a process through which qualitative researchers build trust using peer debriefing or scrutiny. One such practice involves having another researcher read and react to field notes (Stahl & King 2020). Such a review may also include project purposes, questions and types of data that would best meet the research goals (Morse 2018). In qualitative research, “overlap stepwise replication”, “audit trail”, and “dependability audit” methods ensure dependability (Guba 1981:87). Furthermore, dependability can be established through inquiry audits (Alexander 2019). To ensure qualitative data accuracy, external reviewers conduct audits while carefully documenting all inquiry aspects. Such audits instil confidence in data validity. Therefore, researchers can involve external reviewers to assess the accuracy of information.

Dependability in this study was established through the systematic documentation of research processes, peer review of analytical decisions, and clear articulation of methodological choices. In addition, dependability was established by recording detailed research procedures and data management in MAXQDA 2022 thus, keeping an audit trail on decisions made during the analysis process, from the raw data to the generation of codes and themes. The study supervisors were engaged on the study methods and decisions on interpretation (i.e., peer debriefing). This ensured that the inquiry process was transparent and coherent. The interview transcripts were checked

against the original audio recordings and were accompanied by memos to allow for an audit of the inquiry process if requested. This transparent approach enables readers to understand how conclusions were reached and to assess the consistency of the analysis.

4.8.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is restricted in qualitative research to maintain impartiality (Ma & Ma 2022). Readers must evaluate confirmability based on the explanations of the research procedures. Auditable research necessitates objective approaches. Achieving research objectivity demands precision, accuracy, and collaboration with other researchers (Stahl & King 2020). Owing to the detailed description of the methodology approach taken in this study, other researchers can replicate it. While recognising that complete objectivity is impossible in interpretivist research, this study-maintained confirmability through transparent acknowledgement of researcher perspectives and careful documentation of analytical processes. Clearly distinguishing between participant data and researcher interpretations allows readers to confirm the conclusions and potentially reinterpret the findings from different perspectives.

4.8.5 Triangulation

Triangulation refers to multiple referents that help to draw accurate conclusions about the truth (Alexander 2019). Data, time, and methods can be triangulated. To ensure credibility, researchers use several sources or pieces of evidence to draw conclusions about the truth. This process involves gathering information from different sources and using it to arrive at more informed perspectives. As this study involved two distinct groups, DWS managers and external stakeholders, comparing the viewpoints of participants in both groups was necessary to enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study from different perspectives. Triangulation strengthened the findings by highlighting consistent themes as well as differences across the two data sources. This provided important insights into communication dynamics. By comparing internal and external perspectives, the analysis highlighted gaps in understanding that might contribute to communication barriers between the DWS and its stakeholders.

4.8.6 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an essential dimension of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser 2018). It requires the researcher to engage in ongoing, honest self-assessment. This means recognising how personal background, professional experience, and prior assumptions can shape how data is gathered and interpreted. In this study, the principal researcher was employed within the water governance sector for a number of years prior to this investigation. This proximity to the subject matter offered valuable contextual insight. It also required deliberate effort to prevent prior assumptions from influencing the interpretation of participant responses. To manage this, analytical notes were kept throughout the data analysis phase. These notes recorded emerging interpretations alongside an honest account of the researcher's position and any assumptions being made. The focus group and interview data were also reviewed by a peer researcher at two points in the analysis process to provide an independent check on interpretation. This approach is consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidance on prolonged engagement and member checking as strategies to enhance credibility.

4.9 LIMITATIONS

The following limitations shaped the scope and findings of this study: followed directly by the bullet-point list of limitations. The timeframe within which this study was conducted was a limitation that impacted this study. Data collection occurred at the end of 2024 during a severe drought. Therefore, DWS officials availability to participate in the focus groups and stakeholder availability to participate in the interviews were severely limited.

The following limitations are important to note:

- Time constraints: The timeframe within which the study was conducted limited exploration of past and current practices, as trends in communication could not be investigated.
- Approach: While the qualitative approach provided a rich, in-depth understanding of stakeholder experiences, the findings could not be generalised in a statistical sense.

- Level of analysis: The focus of the study was mostly on provincial and national level engagement and not on local level interactions around water governance.
- Accessibility: The participant group comprised stakeholders who were accessible at the time of data collection, which meant that more informal stakeholders were not represented as much as others.
- Institutional context: The study focused on the DWS only, which limited generalisability to other organisations.
- Geographical focus: Owing to limited resources, the study could not cover a larger geographical area, which could have unearthed different stakeholder experiences.

Despite these limitations, the study maintained methodological integrity through careful planning and transparent acknowledgment of limitations. The online format, while introducing some limitations, also enabled participation that might otherwise not have been possible given the political context. The combination of methods further strengthened the study by providing complementary perspectives that enhanced understanding of communication dynamics.

4.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Applying appropriate ethical principles is crucial to protect research participants. This is particularly important in qualitative studies because of their in-depth nature (Arifin 2018). Methodological and ethical considerations in this study were guided by the Ethics Policy of the University of South Africa.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of South Africa on 15 November 2024 to proceed with data collection. The ethical clearance certificate is attached to this document (Appendix A) for complete transparency about the applicable ethical considerations. The research process was reviewed to ensure it met the university's ethical standards and considered the participants' rights and safety before the data collection started. Ethical considerations in this study were informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and permission, among others, as explained below.

4.10.1 Informed consent

Obtaining informed consent is vital in social research. It ensures trustworthiness and honesty in relationships and enables (potential) participants to make their own choices regarding participation in the study. Consent is deemed legitimate only when individual decisions are voluntary and rooted in a comprehensive understanding of the research at hand (Klykken 2021). Furthermore, to ensure the validity of consent, potential participants must be provided with all information pertaining to the study. Participants must clearly understand the nature of consent and the actions they authorise in agreeing to participate (Milluma & Bromwich 2020). In this study, all participants were adults working in the water and sanitation sector who were able to consent to participation.

Participant information sheets (Appendix F) and written consent forms (Appendix E) were sent by email before each interview and focus group. The purpose of the research was described in detail, participants' rights and requirements for involvement, and the time (Appendix G and Appendix H). Signed consent forms were received by email before the interviews (individual and focus group) were conducted. The recording process was explained in detail to the participants. They were reminded of their anonymity and informed that they could opt out of any questions or the process at any time. Consent was reconfirmed at the start of each interview and focus group before recording started.

This approach recognised participants' autonomy and right to make informed decisions about their involvement. The consent process specifically addressed both general research participation and specific aspects like the recording of discussions and potential use of anonymised quotes in reporting. This comprehensive approach ensured participants understood exactly what their consent entailed.

4.10.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidential information is private data that people do not want shared or made public, as public information is accessible to everybody. Currently, South African law protects research participants' privacy and ensures they control what information is shared (Bos 2020). Anonymity is the ability to remain anonymous. This is important because participants often want to speak freely but fear that their statements would become

known by the organisation they represent. Anonymity is, therefore, crucial in interview transcripts (Kang & Hwang 2023). The principles of confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, and privacy are fundamental elements of the research process and must be incorporated to ensure credibility (Kang & Hwang 2023).

The researcher took measures to protect participant privacy by keeping identities anonymous and responses confidential. The researcher replaced all identifiable details (e.g., names and organisation affiliation) with codes (participant codes) at the time of transcription. All audio-recordings and digital transcripts were saved in password-protected folders on a secure personal drive, in accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act 2013). Printed copies used during annotation were stored in a locked physical filing cabinet and securely disposed of after analysis was completed. No printed copies containing identifying information were retained after the study concluded. Participants were assured that only anonymised quotes would be used in research reporting to protect professional relationships, organisational reputation, and standing. Information complied with non-disclosure to third parties and that the information was not shared with anybody else. Furthermore, information gathered in this study is used for academic purposes only.

This approach acknowledged the sensitive nature of organisational communication, particularly when it involved critical perspectives. By ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, the researcher created safe spaces for honest reflection that may otherwise have been suppressed due to concerns about organisational relationships or reputation.

4.10.3 Voluntary participation

Ethical research practice includes obtaining informed consent from participants. This involves providing unbiased information to potential study participants about foreseeable risks and benefits of research participation (Brear 2018). Participants received comprehensive details about the study. They were informed about their rights and what was expected of them. This included the prerogative to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. They also had the right to decline answering questions that made them feel uneasy or uncomfortable. They gave consent to participate in the study by signing the informed consent form. This applied to both

focus group and individual interview participants. Focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed to ensure data accuracy and impartiality.

The voluntary nature of participation extended beyond initial consent to include ongoing autonomy throughout the study process. Participants retained the right to skip questions, take breaks, or withdraw entirely at any point without negative consequences. This approach respected participant agency and acknowledged the potentially sensitive nature of discussions about organisational communication. During each interview or focus group meeting, the researcher communicated to the participants their right to continue with participation in the research and made sure they were willing to be recorded. In addition, the researcher also tried to be attentive to their reactions and nonverbal cues in order to pick up if they showed discomfort to respond to questions.

4.10.4 Sensitive information management

The researcher was the only person with access to the original data. To protect participant confidentiality, no identities were disclosed in any reporting. After data collection and transcription, all identifiable information was removed from the audio-recorded data. Data will be stored for 15 years after project completion, and the researcher has taken reasonable care to ensure no unauthorised access occurs. Digital transcripts, reports, and sensitive information are kept in a password protected computer.

It was recognised that discussions of organisational communication may reveal potentially sensitive information about internal processes, challenges, or individual perspectives that could have professional consequences if not properly protected. The secure handling of data demonstrates respect for participants and their organisations while maintaining research integrity.

4.10.5 Avoiding harm

The researcher ensured that the participants did not feel threatened or at risk at any time. Participants reserved the right to withdraw from the study without consequences if they wished to do so. Conducting focus groups and interviews through online platforms reduced risks of physical harm.

When conducting research, considering informed consent and verifying consent when using elicited or enacted approaches is essential. Safeguarding data and protecting participant identities are equally important. In online research, privacy is a critical concept – individuals should control how their personal information is collected and used (Bloomberg & Volpe 2019). Researchers must ensure participant confidentiality and avoid information misuse.

Avoiding harm extends beyond physical harm and includes psychological, social, and professional considerations. In the study design, the researcher considered potential power dynamics and organisational politics that might create risks for participants and incorporated strategies to mitigate these concerns through confidentiality, voluntary participation, and careful data handling.

4.10.6 Permission

Before conducting the research, an ethical clearance application was submitted to the UNISA Ethics Review Committee. The approval letter is attached to this dissertation (see Appendix A). A researcher acknowledgement form confirming adherence to ethical guidelines was also completed (Appendix B). Prior to data collection, written permission was obtained from the DWS leadership to access staff and stakeholder participants (Appendix C). This formal ethical review process ensured the research design met established standards for ethical research practice. The process ensured independent assessment of potential risks and benefits of the study, strengthening the ethical foundation of the study beyond individual assurances alone.

4.10.7 Avoiding deception

The university's ethical approval was shared with participants. Participants received the consent forms prior to interviews or focus group discussions. Research bias can occur either intentionally or unintentionally. Bias may lead to false conclusions and may mislead those involved in the study and readers of the research. Therefore, conducting biased research is immoral and unethical (Šimundić 2013). To conduct reliable research, vigilance is required to ensure information is not falsified, results are not distorted, bias does not influence the results, data are not misused, and appropriate research methods are used. This commitment to transparency and

honesty was maintained throughout the research process, from participant recruitment through data collection, analysis, and reporting. By avoiding deception in all forms, the study maintained not only ethical integrity but also methodological credibility, as findings reflect genuine participant experiences rather than manipulated processes.

4.11 SUMMARY

This chapter discussed the research design and methodological approach that guided this study. Starting with the philosophical foundations of the interpretivist paradigm, the chapter established the ontological, epistemological, and axiological positions that framed the study. These philosophical underpinnings informed the selected research design and methods of data collection. The sampling method was discussed. Data were collected by means of focus group discussions with DWS communication staff and semi-structured interviews with external stakeholders. The thematic analysis approach was discussed as the data analysis method. Lastly, criteria for trustworthiness, including a discussion on reflexivity as the sixth criterion of trustworthiness and ethical considerations applicable to this study were highlighted. The next chapter presents the results of the study.

CHAPTER 5. RESULTS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a synthesis and interpretation of the data that emerged from the semi-structured interview and focus group discussions. The chapter presents the main themes identified in the data, beginning with the external stakeholder interviews, and then the focus group discussions. This approach allowed for inquiry into the external and internal perspectives, respectively, as well as for triangulation of the datasets to determine overlaps and differences. The findings are then collated, and implications for integrated communication practice are discussed.

5.2 RESULTS FROM INTERVIEWS

This section presents the findings that emerged from the semi-structured interviews. Five key themes are discussed.

5.2.1 Online semi-structured interviews

The findings that emerged from the 10 online semi-structured interviews are discussed in this subsection. The results are organised thematically, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the key insights provided by external stakeholders of the DWS. Each participant held a managerial position in their respective organisations and had a minimum of five years' experience.

5.2.2 Theme 1: Stakeholder identification and analysis

References to communication in this theme speak specifically to how communication needs, channel preferences, and feedback requirements function as variables for identifying and categorising stakeholders. Communication as a relational and engagement process is addressed in Theme 2. The distinction is between communication as an identification criterion and communication as a relational practice.

Theme 1 explores the processes of stakeholder identification and analysis with a view to informing an integrated communication framework for DWS. This theme focuses primarily on stakeholder identification and analysis.

- **Sub-theme: Stakeholder identification and analysis**

Bridoux and Stoelhorst (2022) proposed an extension to stakeholder theory. They posit that stakeholders involved in joint value-creation activities have a collective action problem, since these activities come with shared dependence on outcomes and task interdependencies. The above study described stakeholders as people, collectives, donor agencies, private sector partners (Mining, Energy and Agriculture), NGOs, research institutes, academia, and community-based organisations with a direct stake in DWS initiatives and policies (Department of Water Affairs 2013).

Stakeholders are clearly and comprehensively defined in the study. For instance, P6 noted that, “as a stakeholder and citizen, I am deeply invested in the DWS initiatives and policies that affect our communities”. Categorisation was also essential to identifying and classifying primary and secondary stakeholders, including their communication needs. See Chapter 3, Section 3.4.8. P1 believed that “stakeholder mapping helps to categorise primary and secondary stakeholders better”.

P7 proposed that DWS should “conduct stakeholder mapping and analysis workshops to identify and segment stakeholders at both the national and decentralised levels”. P2 and P9 made similar comments and noted that stakeholders must be consulted in national and local stakeholder mapping and analysis to have a better understanding of their needs. It would involve the DWS reviewing stakeholder identification criteria and the various methods used to engage with stakeholders. The above ideas show that the participants appreciated that stakeholder mapping and analysis are constantly identified as critical for defining stakeholder needs and improving communication targeting. Petruney *et al.* (2010) discovered that their well-planned stakeholder mapping methodology handled significant information quantities to generate a comparatively small but more comprehensive stakeholder list, which refined and added value to the research process. It also showed that the DWS must map its stakeholders to identify and define them, as required by the National Water Resource Strategy 2 (NWRS 2) and the National Water Act (1998), accurately and thoroughly.

- **Sub-theme: Stakeholder communication needs as an identification variable.**

Communication needs emerged as a stakeholder identification variable because feedback requirements, channel preferences, and information frequency shaped how

participants defined their relationship with DWS. Degenaar, Fourie and Holtzhausen (2022) demonstrate that in organisations with complex, multi-sector mandates analogous to the DWS communication needs analysis is a precondition for effective stakeholder identification rather than a subsequent step. When communication requirements are treated as identifiers, organisations move from static lists to dynamic, purpose-driven stakeholder engagement. The findings in this study confirm this: several participants specifically described their communication needs feedback, information frequency, and channel access as the lens through which they defined their relationship with the DWS.

The DWS needs to enhance its analysis to assess stakeholder groups, their communication needs, and preferences adequately. P3 noted the DWS needed to “conduct in-depth analysis of stakeholder communication needs and concerns to develop more targeted and responsive messaging”. P4’s comments concurred with P3 and added that the DWS should improve its “analysis of stakeholder communication needs, [the] DWS should consider mapping comments within different sectors and providing feedback on how those comments shape departmental actions but consider the need to avoid stakeholder fatigue”. The DWS should engage in stakeholder identification to ensure successful communication and engagement initiatives. This finding concurs with the study of Gregory, Atkins, Midgley and Hodgson (2020), which sought to understand how one may go about identifying “actual” stakeholders in particular situations and not necessarily all stakeholders. Rather than starting with stakeholder lists or managerial assumptions on dubious stakeholders, it attempted tangible stakeholder identification. Identification must be specific and clearly defined to be focused on messaging.

P8 doubted the DWS’s identification and grouping of stakeholders were precise and clear: “Particularly in the energy sector, strategic water users have specific communication needs.” P9’s statement concurred with this view: “DWS efforts in identifying stakeholders are insufficient, lacking outreach beyond transactional interactions.” This participant stressed the importance of clearly identifying stakeholder groups and adjusting communication tactics to their needs and preferences. P8 also mentioned the need for nuanced communication, recognising that effective communication required an understanding of the audience.

This exercise must consider stakeholders such as NGOs, businesses, and donor agencies across the various sectors and understand their relationship with the DWS and what they expect of the DWS in their roles and responsibilities. Therefore, a communication requirements analysis is critical. Communication needs analysis involves analysing stakeholder communication requirements, such as feedback systems, continuous participation, and DWS points of contact, to clarify their engagement roles and responsibilities.

Considering these findings, it is recommended that the DWS look into how stakeholder analysis methods would be reviewed and provide feedback on how this should be done based on stakeholders' inputs, for instance, gathering stakeholder inputs through focus group discussions to determine better ways of identifying stakeholders. The concept of meaningful engagement is underlined here. P7 believed that the DWS may use a "bottom-up approach" to identifying stakeholders, which would help the DWS in identifying, consulting, and contacting all its stakeholders to ensure that none is missed. It would also assist stakeholders to link easily and regularly through digital media using other social media networks.

- **Sub-theme: Feedback mechanisms and communication requirements analysis**

P1 said: "I believe feedback mechanisms are fundamental. Continuous engagement with the DWS is also crucial. It fosters a sense of collaboration as we work together to address challenges, whether those are issues the DWS faces with institutions or the challenges my institution encounters." Improved feedback systems were also seen as important by participants from the energy, mining, agriculture, and NGO sectors.

The above findings showed that stakeholder mapping, needs analysis, feedback systems, constant involvement, and DWS points of contact in organisations inform stakeholder communication needs analysis. P5 recommended that the DWS should "thoroughly analyse stakeholder communication needs and concerns to develop more targeted and responsive messaging". Table 5.1 provides all codes related to the subject above.

Table 1.10: Theme 1: Stakeholder identification and analysis

Theme 1: Stakeholder identification and analysis	
Codes	• Stakeholder identification

	• Stakeholder categorisation • Stakeholder communication needs • Stakeholder analysis strategies and recommendations • Stakeholder mapping • Communication needs analysis • Feedback mechanisms
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The following theme is on stakeholder engagement.

5.2.3 Theme 2: Stakeholder engagement

This theme presents the participants' views on the perceived importance of stakeholder engagement to the DWS's external stakeholders. It also attempts to highlight issues around accountability, credibility, and responsiveness. Stakeholder engagement with the public, politicians, and employees was presented in Chapter 3, section 3.5.6.

○ Sub theme Accountability as a stakeholder expectation

Accountability emerged as a distinct driver of stakeholder engagement in its own right, not merely as an outcome of other sub-themes. Participants consistently connected accountability to the regularity and transparency of DWS communication. P1 emphasised that accountability required the DWS to close the loop on commitments made during engagement sessions. P7 stated directly that accountability is fundamentally important to the quality of the relationship. These responses indicate that participants understood accountability not as a passive result of good engagement, but as an active standard that the DWS was expected to meet. The literature supports this. Freeman (1984) and Bridoux and Stoelhorst (2022) argue that effective stakeholder governance requires institutionalised feedback mechanisms that make organisations answerable for their communication commitments, not just responsive to them. The findings show that the DWS's accountability to its stakeholders remains inconsistent, functioning more as a procedural requirement than a relational one.

Stakeholder engagement was perceived as an accountability tool to enhance relations with stakeholders and the public. Corporate credibility implies the extent to which stakeholder engagement promotes trust and reliability (Ngu & Amran 2018). P1 stated: "It is undeniably important as it contributes to improved relationships and enhanced transparency." P7 added that "accountability is fundamentally important". The

interviewees agreed that effective stakeholder engagement was vital for water and sanitation, as it provided a platform for transparency and timely follow-up on issues that affected the concerned stakeholders, rather than the DWS closing the loop by providing information on the matter.

The participants agreed that stakeholder engagement was “critically important”, “the foundation or cornerstone of water management”, or “absolutely fundamental” to DWS work in the water sector because of the “vital nature of water” as a resource used in many ways. Many stakeholders need to be involved. The findings also revealed that engagement had enabled accountability through transparency, feedback, and following up on matters. P9 stated: “Effective strategic-level alignment and engagement between DWS and key stakeholders are essential for understanding and addressing their communication needs.” P6 also mentioned that “it is vital for improving water governance, enhancing environmental outcomes, and increasing water security within the sector”.

In some cases, engagement may build trust in institutions and credibility in organisations. P5 said: “I think it is imperative. I remember when water and sanitation issues were prevalent. Many of these engagements helped build trust.” P4 also said: “Stakeholder engagement is undoubtedly essential. It truly helps to improve relationships, boost transparency, and demonstrate a willingness to participate. I believe many of our activities revolve around understanding the rules of engagement.” In its corporate capacity, the DWS has been found to have credibility. Credibility refers to how far the organisation has been able to achieve trust and reliability in water sector engagement with other stakeholders (Ngu & Amran 2018). P8 said that “trust and credibility are critical; they are foundational to the relationship”.

Yeo (2025) explains that, through targeted messaging and stimulating direct engagement when issues are raised and resolved, specific concerns can be addressed directly by organisations. However, it was found that this was not always the case with the DWS, as P4 said: “I believe the department’s communication strategy partially considers some of the factors affecting our communities, whether they come from stakeholder issues or environmental influences. While it addresses these themes, it is not direct.” In other words, the DWS needs to be more strategic in how it engages its stakeholders to be responsive rather than just acknowledging the

information it sends out. It was found that effective engagement with stakeholders must include genuine participation instead of tokenistic engagement (Keremidchiev 2021).

The study findings show that stakeholder engagement is perceived to be essential to water and sanitation as a sector in South Africa, as a governance tool, and as a process to improve relations. This is supported by the finding that engagement is thought to be critically important, as it is viewed to be fundamental, key, or indispensable to the DWS's activities in the water sector. As a vital resource to many users, it can be used to promote accountability and trust through transparency and reliability.

Nevertheless, the findings showed a disparity between what was being proposed by scholars and what DWS practised. There was scope for improved engagement with stakeholders, rather than the DWS just acknowledging stakeholder concerns without being consistently responsive. The findings also indicated that stakeholder engagement must be genuine and reciprocal rather than tokenistic. Table 5.2 reflects the codes that emerged from the findings that constituted this theme.

Table 1.11: Theme 2: Stakeholder engagement

Theme 2: Stakeholder engagement	
Codes	• Impact of stakeholder engagement • Importance of stakeholder engagement • Enhancing accountability • Ethical partnerships and cooperation • Accountability • Two-way communication

5.2.4 Theme 3: Communication practices and challenges

Theme 3 focuses on the distribution of information regarding departmental programmes through stakeholder networks and to what extent the coordination of this information is shared through the available platforms. The communication coordination analysis aims to look at the efficacy of available communication channels, whether vertical or horizontal.

The most predominant and, according to participants, effective means through which stakeholders receive information from the department is through direct communication

or public consultation. P8 stated that, “for us, it has always been either direct communication or public consultation, and these are the two most important ways through which we have access to this kind of information”. Quarterly bilateral meetings, based on available evidence, are a good platform for information sharing. However, some participants felt that more platforms were needed, and these needed to go beyond water-use authorisations.

All participants agreed that the sector platforms were effective, particularly the Water and Sanitation Sector Leadership Group (WSSLG). However, this is not the entire narrative of the situation of sector platforms. Significant implementation gaps characterise the water sector. In other words, prescribed governance mechanisms do not automatically result in effective delivery or the necessary change within the sector. Frictions run high and are expressed through already existing platforms. P8 noted the institutional constraints to stakeholder engagement frameworks: “While we had platforms such as WSSLG where we were supposedly active members, and even leading those meetings, the institutional structure meant our recommendations were rarely translated into actionable policy changes.”

The strategic consistency of messaging and information shared by the DWS and how it impacts the ability of other stakeholders to provide input and feedback were analysed. Platforms and channels through which communication can occur between the DWS and its stakeholders are critical for vertical (national to local) and horizontal (cross-sector) interactions. Participants, used email, official correspondence, in-person engagement, and the DWS’s website as the main platforms for vertical communication coordination. However, several participants expressed concern about the department’s responsiveness.

Patterns of engagement among stakeholders conveyed a story of disengagement and one-way reactive relationships. Patterns of cooperative working did not seem to feature. P6 added: “[T]he only times that we are engaged are during the promulgation of specific policies, when we are engaged in a consultation session with [the] DWS, but that is as far as it goes.” This response implies a reactive, one-off transactional relationship. This is at odds with the idea of sustained, co-creative types of participation. Responses in terms of the success of the platform(s) showed that the WSSLG had not met on a regular basis, and it had been met with a level of critique

from participants. These critiques note the nature of the DWS committee and its control of information sharing and agenda setting. Therefore, the space created for cooperation in the WSSLG becomes one of performative tokenism.

The Strategic Water Partners Network (SWPN) was met with high approval when asked about its effectiveness as a multistakeholder example. The formation of a network between government, business, and civil society, the SWPN was noted as effective in working towards resolutions of key water challenges in the country, as stated in the first report in 2024, such as the 17% anticipated gap between water supply and demand by 2030 (SWPN 2024). Participants agreed that the SWPN was an effective mechanism of cooperation, a testament to it not only achieving its mandate but also in an inclusive manner. The full buy-in from stakeholders for an independent platform created outside of the department, in comparison to their own department-led, government counterparts, is a telling contrast.

Although the results indicated 100% approval in the sample participants, this fact of agreement should be taken with caution. The close to 100% agreement noted in this sample set of stakeholders may not be the same scenario in the stakeholder group at large, or in other sectors. In fact, this is not often the case in qualitative research. A few things should be considered about these results. First, the level of agreement noted here is about the sampled participants and not the entire stakeholder population. Second, it may be that other stakeholders who had different views were not sampled or chose not to share their different views. Third, the agreement may be because of the participants responding to what they thought the facilitator wanted to hear, or their stakeholder relationship involved a power situation. Networking in government, business, and civil society relationships forms clusters that may coordinate.

Vertical communication with the DWS and the various stakeholder organisations, as well as with the public, occurred via the use of email, official letters, face-to-face engagement, and the department's website. However, feedback from several participants highlighted concern about the responsiveness of the department. As aptly stated by P5: "Our association has demonstrated variable responsiveness based on sector and individual stakeholder interaction." This alludes to a perceived inconsistency in the way the DWS engaged with various stakeholders.

The general underutilisation of social media as a potential communication channel to

reach out to and inform the public at large was a cause for concern. P8 noted that social media pages only had posts when the “Minister or Deputy Minister is seen cutting a ribbon”. P2, P6 and P10 echoed similar sentiments on the lack of useful information on social media platforms.

Coordination across sectors was also not seen as active in the water sector. P7 acknowledged: “[T]he level of cooperation between the different stakeholders in the water sector is quite a challenge because it is a complicated landscape, with all of us having very different priorities.” The general pattern from the findings was an overall lack of cross-sector coordination between the DWS and other government departments, the private sector, and non-profit stakeholders. In fact, several participants were insistent that there was no effective platform for cross-sector coordination. P1 said that, “at the moment, there is none that exists”. This then points to a significant lack of cross-sectoral coordination of governance for initiatives in the water sector. This theme shows that communication remained largely reactive, with limited evidence of sustained cross sector coordination. Table 5.3 illustrates the codes for theme 3.

Table 1.12 Theme 3: Communication practices and challenges

Theme 3: Communication practices and challenges	
Codes	• Communication coordination • Communication platforms • Vertical and horizontal communication • Communication coordination

The next theme discusses ethical partnerships.

5.2.5 Theme 4: Ethical partnerships

This theme examines the characteristics of ethical partnerships between the DWS and stakeholders and how they influenced and affected processes and decision-making. Ethical partnerships (alliances) demonstrate shared values, integrity, and a commitment to the common good (Abdullah & Musa 2015). The analysis showed that ethical partnerships with a focus on cooperation between the DWS and stakeholders were of paramount importance.

All participants agreed that ethical partnerships were essential and would have a

positive impact in terms of decision-making and stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, participants agreed that the shared characteristics were shared values, integrity, cooperation, and a focus on the common good. P10 articulated the essence of ethical partnerships by stating, “we talk about zero harm and have zero tolerance for fraud, corruption, and malfeasance”. Another participant (P8) highlighted the significance of “trust, complete trust, and open, transparent communication”. Furthermore, P5 noted that ethical partnerships must embody “transparency, fairness, respect, accountability, and responsiveness”, ensuring that all parties fulfil their commitments.

These findings are consistent with Abdullah and Musa (2015), who identify shared values, trust, and commitment as the defining characteristics of business partnerships that generate long-term value. In public sector contexts, Patzer, Voegtlin and Scherer (2018) argue that ethical partnerships require institutionalised norms of authentic dialogue rather than episodic consultation. The DWS's emphasis on partnership agreements and formal action plans, as described by participants, reflects an understanding of this principle, even if its implementation has been inconsistent.

P9 described ethical partnerships as “important to build trust and a track record of delivery, along with ensuring that the partnership's activities are ethically sound and socially responsible”. There is evidence that the messaging being shared by the DWS on their engagement with stakeholders was inconsistent, which impacted their ability to engage stakeholders, as it did not encourage partnerships. The DWS's communication strategies lacked consistency and changed frequently from one initiative to another. According to P6, “the messaging changes all the time from one to the other”.

Inconsistency in strategic messaging from the department can make it difficult for stakeholders to engage, resulting in ineffective partnerships. Strategic consistency, on the other hand, provides a reliable communication framework that helps stakeholders to have confidence in the department's intentions and commitments. P3 indicated: “DWS have been consistent enough, which has allowed the organisation to provide valuable input, especially with regards to the water user registration process.” In contrast, P6 added, “in terms of the consistency from the department, they didn't engage us to find out our concerns”.

Trust plays an important role in collaboration, including motivating actors to become more engaged (Corbaz-Kurth *et al.* 2025). The evidence shows that, when stakeholders understand that the DWS is trustworthy and will follow through on its commitments and listen to their suggestions, they are willing to engage more with initiatives, resulting in positive outcomes. Strategic consistency also helps with communication clarity, which allows stakeholders to understand the department's goals better. Clear communication can also help to avoid misunderstandings that can result from frequent shifts in focus. An example was given by P4 where the DWS's strategic consistency with their messaging on water user registration "helped their organisation to provide input and ensure their members were informed and empowered to comply".

P9 said: "[I]t is paramount that DWS use consistent messaging to establish a fundamental basis for both accountability and responsiveness in partnerships." P4 added that clarity and clear expression of strategic objectives and plans allowed stakeholders to "more effectively monitor and assess the department's actions and decisions". The data indicated that the DWS's communication strategies were lacking and needed significant improvement. The communication strategies used by the DWS were inconsistent, changing from initiative to initiative and negatively impacted stakeholder engagement. The perceived lack of strategic consistency in DWS messaging did not encourage stakeholders to have a more significant role and input in the decision-making process.

The evidence showed that the DWS's communication strategies only partially considered environmental factors and stakeholders' concerns. A greater focus on climate change, water security, and pollution was needed, which would also encourage the DWS to strive for transparency with stakeholders. Therefore, both the DWS and stakeholders needed to maintain responsibility for communication to promote good governance within the water sector. Results revealed a significant lack of alignment between the DWS's approach and the concept of ethical partnerships, thus forming a paradox in which effective partnerships require transparency and accountability but current communication channels and processes contribute to a lack of transparency around issues that the institution faces. By improving its transparency with partners, around both problems and solutions, the DWS could change the relationship with stakeholders from reactionary consultations to proactive

partnerships. The evidence also suggested that an improvement could be made to DWS messaging by focusing more on sharing both the challenges it faces and the solutions that are considered and utilising more of their technical capabilities. The theme explored the concept of ethical partnerships and their impact on the relationship between the DWS and its external stakeholders. Ethical partnerships were framed as relationships built on trust, consistency, transparency, and accountability rather than on one off consultation. Table 5.4 includes the codes for theme 4.

Table 1.13 Theme 4: Ethical partnerships

Theme 4: Ethical partnerships	
Codes	• Strategic consistency • Ethics • Trust • Transparency • Accountability

The next section discusses theme 5.

5.2.6 Theme 5: Developing an integrated communication strategy

Theme 5 identifies the key factors that drive the need for integration as a strategy enabler: delineate the common motivations for having an integrated approach, such as cross-sectoral, inter-governmental cooperation, departmental, internal and organisation-wide consistency, and the capability to fulfil core competencies. This theme shows how environmental factors and stakeholder concerns are considered in the current communication strategy and explores the benefits of a more integrated approach.

There were indications of existing challenges regarding inter-cooperation between the DWS and sector role players. There is evidence of instances where co-operative relations were in some instances difficult to achieve or sustain through lack of coordination, non-responsiveness, and general tension between the regulators and the regulated. P3 observed that co-operation was “important, necessary, but it can be a bit challenging. I think the department is quite a big animal with many different directorates, so sometimes it’s quite difficult to coordinate.” P6 indicated that “we are below 5 in 10” as regards co-operation and that it had been “going downhill” for several years.

The fact that the DWS regional offices experienced high staff turnover was seen to negatively affect their co-operation with stakeholders. P5 referred to the “complex constellation” of water-user associations, irrigation boards and mines in their region, making co-operation “quite a challenge”. Evidence shows that the organisational decision-making processes were, in some instances, both positively and negatively affected by DWS approaches to partnerships with others. P10 mentioned that, from their experience, decision making appeared to be “kind of reactive”, with the department sometimes taking too long to get “around the table”.

P2 contrasted two experiences, one being a very positive example of a more streamlined process. This was compared with a less positive example: “we made an enquiry, and we did not receive a response”. Most participants indicated the DWS’s approach to core competencies as being neutral and offering few or no direct benefits. P1 mentioned: “We have not experienced any direct benefits from the department’s core competencies.” However, private sector participants, who experienced direct interaction with the DWS provided more positive responses. P7 indicated that the DWS “have been advising us multiple times in a very collaborative spirit, they really want to work with us” on matters such as registration and tariffs. The extent to which the DWS communication strategy took environmental considerations into account, including climate change, water security, and water pollution, yielded mixed views. P5 said the following: “Yes, I think the communication strategy that we have at the moment does consider environmental factors such as climate change, water security and water pollution, as can be seen through the development of the National Water Resource Strategy, as well as the consultations that were held.” P2 referred to the master plan as “the Bible for my organisation”. P9 stated that the DWS strategy did take these into account through “different department initiatives”.

P3 was of the view that the DWS communication strategy “doesn’t consider all” environmental factors. This participant felt that the approach “kind of partially considers some of the factors impacting our communities”. The benefits of integration were identified in terms of the need to address the interlinked or shared nature of water resources. P10 spoke of “the benefit of having a holistic or systems approach, because the resource itself is a holistic thing, water operates beyond provincial boundaries”. P8 shared a similar opinion: “[I]ntegration is key, because all the stakeholders have their priorities. But they must line up with the National Water Strategy.”

These findings align with Barker (2013), who identifies data-driven marketing, stakeholder focus, and mission marketing as priority strategic drivers for complex, multi-stakeholder organisations. Degenaar, Fourie and Holtzhausen (2022) further confirm that resource-constrained organisations in governance contexts must apply strategic communication drivers selectively rather than comprehensively. The selective application proposed in this study directly responds to both the participant data and this body of literature. The findings confirm that integrated communication in the DWS requires both vertical and horizontal coordination to reduce fragmentation.

The strategic communication priorities identified by participants align with Barker's (2013) framework of strategic integrated communication, which identifies data-driven marketing, mission marketing, and purposeful interactivity as core drivers in organisations with complex stakeholder mandates. Degenaar, Fourie and Holtzhausen (2022) confirm that resource-constrained organisations working within governance frameworks, comparable to the DWS's constitutional obligations, must prioritise selectively rather than applying all strategic drivers simultaneously. This selective application is built into the integrated communication framework proposed in Chapter 6.

Sharing information was identified by several participants, as information about DWS programmes was not consistently or constantly made available. The ways in which participants accessed information, which they considered as most important, were DWS communication approaches, either direct communication with them or information available from public consultation processes. This theme shows that the DWS's communication strategy depends on internal integration before external communication can be effective. Table 5.5 reflects the codes that emerged from the findings that constitute theme 5.

Table 1.14: Theme 5: Developing an integrated communication strategy

Theme 5: Developing an integrated communication strategy	
Codes	• Drivers of integrated communication • Core competencies • Integration of organisation, stakeholders, and environment • Leveraging core competencies • Information sharing

The next section discusses the key findings that emerged from the online focus group

discussions.

5.3 RESULTS FROM ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

Significant insights were gathered from the two online focus group discussions. These discussions shed light on the communication practices, challenges, and opportunities within the DWS at the time of the study. The following key themes were identified: stakeholder identification, stakeholder analysis, communication strategies, stakeholder engagement, ethical partnerships, integration, balancing interests, and communication challenges.

5.3.1 Theme 1: Stakeholder identification and analysis

Although stakeholder identification and stakeholder engagement share conceptual boundaries, the references to communication and engagement in this theme speak specifically to the identification function that is, how engagement processes are used to determine who the stakeholders are, what they need, and how they can be reached. The engagement theme (Theme 2) addresses the quality and outcomes of engagement once stakeholders have been identified. The distinction is between engagement as identification tool and engagement as relational process.

- **Sub-theme: Importance of stakeholder engagement**

Promoting leadership and stakeholder engagement in the public sector often involves regular consultation and open communication with all key role players (Zarewa 2019). This position was confirmed during the online focus group discussions. The participants were unanimous in their belief that communication was the cornerstone of stakeholder engagement. As participant FG1-P1 put it: “[E]ffective communication starts with an extensive understanding of stakeholders.” This implies that stakeholder analysis comes before engagement can take place. The DWS did not, however, have a consolidated list of stakeholders, as some identified groups, including municipalities, were recognised but are not uniformly involved in decision making. FG2-P3 and FG1-P4 agreed that early stakeholder engagement can be used for trust-building purposes through peer-to-peer communication and formal interactions with officials, which is in line with Elwy, Maguire, Kim and West’s (2022) participatory governance process.

The focus group participants agreed on a wide range of stakeholders with whom the

DWS interacted throughout South Africa. FG1-P4 said: “[I]n my opinion, these are our key stakeholders or people that we do business with daily, including municipalities and water boards as well as NGOs and donor bodies, alongside representatives from the business sector and water users.” Although the National Water Strategy made provisions for stakeholder engagement, FG1-P5 said that the department was inconsistent with its identification, pointing out that “a consistent method is necessary for stakeholder identification and evaluation”. FG1-P3 and FG2-P6 added that the lack of a stakeholder analysis framework meant that the DWS could not develop tailored approaches to communications, limiting its ability to foster inclusive participation.

- **Sub-theme: Credibility and trust-building**

The current approach of the DWS to stakeholder communication needs came under scrutiny when the focus group participants presented their analyses. FG2-P3 mentioned institutional shortfalls, suggesting a “standardised and comprehensive stakeholder mapping exercise to identify all relevant stakeholders and their specific communication needs”. The participants also noted that their strategies were project-specific, according to FG2-P3: “We look at which project is supposed to be liaising with which stakeholders it will differ from one project to another.” Municipalities were consistently mentioned as key partners to the DWS; however, identification still occurred on an ad hoc basis and remained siloed.

Local governance was presented as a fundamental part of the DWS’s outreach strategy, with the participants recognising municipalities as key implementation partners. However, FG1-P5’s lamented: “[U]nfortunately for the department, I have done stakeholder work in different sectors, and frankly, our department is lacking on many levels.” The implication is that there is an urgent need for structural reform. This is consistent with Zarewa’s (2019) viewpoint about inconsistent stakeholder identification leading to trust issues and ineffective operations.

- **Sub-theme: Accountability as a stakeholder expectation**

Accountability emerged as a distinct driver of stakeholder engagement, not simply an outcome of it. Several participants connected accountability directly to the regularity and transparency of DWS communication. P1 stated that accountability required the DWS to ‘close the loop’ to follow through on commitments made during engagement sessions and to report back on what happened. P7 was direct: ‘accountability is

fundamentally important.' These responses point to a pattern where participants equated accountability with the DWS's willingness to be answerable, not merely accessible. Effective stakeholder engagement, in this view, is not just about creating platforms for dialogue; it is about honouring the commitments that those platforms generate (Freeman 1984; Jones, Felps and Bridges 2007).

The findings show a consistent tension between the DWS's formal commitment to stakeholder accountability and its operational practice. Participants acknowledged the existence of engagement structures, such as the WSSLG and sector bilateral meetings. They noted, however, that these structures did not reliably produce accountability outcomes. P4 observed that the department 'addresses themes but is not direct'. P9 described DWS stakeholder efforts as lacking sufficient follow-through beyond transactional interactions. This gap between accountability as principle and accountability as practice aligns with Bridoux and Stoelhorst (2022), who argue that accountability in stakeholder governance requires institutionalised feedback mechanisms, not just symbolic engagement. The integrated communication framework proposed in Chapter 6 responds to this by including formal feedback loops and communication needs assessments as structural components.

○ **Sub-theme: Two-way communication and responsive**

At the time, the DWS worked with a broad range of external stakeholders, such as municipalities, water boards, NGOs, National Treasury, private sector bodies, and water users, and they all played an important role in achieving the department's objectives. FG1-P4 explained that, while the way stakeholders were categorised depended on "project mandates and stakeholder interest/influence". effort was made to tailor communications to the different groups. However, there is no agreed department-wide system, resulting in compartmentalised engagement and a mismatch between intention and practice. Table 5.6 illustrates the codes for theme 1.

Table 1.15: Theme 1: Stakeholder identification and analysis

Theme 1: Stakeholder identification and analysis	
Codes	• Stakeholder identification • Stakeholder communication needs • External stakeholders • Criteria for identification • Tailoring messaging • Effectiveness of current approach

The findings confirm that stakeholder identification, when operationalised to include communication needs analysis, functions as a foundational component of an integrated communication framework. Identifying what stakeholders need to know, in what format, and through which channels, is inseparable from identifying who the stakeholders are. This finding directly informs Component 1 of the integrated communication framework presented in Chapter 6.

The next theme focuses on stakeholder engagement and trust building.

5.3.2 Theme 2: Stakeholder engagement and trust-building

Theme 2 addresses processes of accountability-building through a system of stakeholder engagement and dialogue to improve transparency and institutional legitimacy. The goal of this theme was to explore how improved and institutionalised stakeholder engagement can be leveraged for trust-building and more open and accountable governance arrangements in the water sector.

Stakeholder involvement in DWS activities improves openness and accountability, participants said. FG2-P6 said: “The more we involve stakeholders, the more we can ensure that they recognise the department's efforts.” FG2-P5 said, “If we maintain stakeholder involvement, it will subsequently enhance accountability”. FG2-P6 remarked, “The more we engage with stakeholders, the more we will see them acknowledge the department's work”. FG1-P3 said, “If we continue to engage with stakeholders, it will also improve the overall accountability”.

This indicates the necessity for an organised, continuing interaction approach that builds confidence and respect (Gregory *et al.* 2020). Participants highly advocated a thorough stakeholder management approach with an integrated communication plan. A participant, F2-P6, suggested “a stakeholder management strategy which includes an integrated communication plan”. This suggests a systematic ongoing engagement strategy for trust and respect (Gregory *et al.* 2020). The two focus groups illustrated that the current approach reacts to stakeholder needs only as circumstances dictate, which undermines proactive SRM and trust-building initiatives. To build strong relationships and ensure effective communication, a strategic communication approach must be adopted.

The study found that the DWS lacks a stakeholder-specific communication structure.

The information from both focus groups largely supported the present strategy, which primarily meets stakeholder demands based on predetermined scenarios, which is against creating trust and proactive stakeholder connections. A responsive stakeholder-focused communication strategy is needed for strong connections and successful communications. Further investigation showed that stakeholder participation is essential for water sector trust and accountability. Stakeholder involvement in departmental activities may boost transparency and effort, participants said. FG1-P2 said, "The more we engage stakeholders in various departmental activities, the greater their understanding of the department's efforts becomes". This proactive approach may improve DWS stakeholder views.

Participants also emphasised integrating a stakeholder management approach with a communication plan. A participant, FG2-P4, commented, "We need to establish a stakeholder management strategy that includes an integrated communication plan," indicating a need for organised, ethical partnership participation. Another participant, FG1-P2, noted, "We need to definitely have this stakeholder management strategy, which will have an integrated communication plan", demonstrating a clear expectation for organised involvement that follows ethical partnership standards.

Stakeholder participation is essential for corporate responsibility and legitimacy (Ngu, Amran, & Sie 2018). The study shows that ethical stakeholder interactions based on trust, collaboration, and information sharing may boost responsibility. Stakeholder involvement in DWS activities improves openness and accountability, participants said. This initiative requires strategic messaging and stakeholder engagement. DWS managers unanimously agreed that DWS's stakeholder involvement is reactive and needs-driven, interacting with stakeholders only, when necessary, rather than proactively building connections and meeting their requirements.

Proactive stakeholder involvement and ethical collaborations were key topics. Stakeholder participation in DWS activities improves openness and accountability in a systematic, continuing process based on trust and respect, participants said. According to FG1-P3, "it's important for DWS to uphold the promises and commitments we make to stakeholders to build trust and credibility" in the water industry. Participants said integrating stakeholders in departmental activities will boost transparency and effort. This proactive strategy may improve DWS stakeholder views.

The DWS lacks a communication structure that meets stakeholder needs, according to findings. According to FG2-P1, “the current approach to communication responds to stakeholder needs only as situations develop”. FG1-P2 said that “stakeholder involvement is important to build trust and should involve consistent engagement throughout the year, not just during project launches”. This reactionary approach hinders proactive stakeholder management and trust-building among varied groups. Strategic communication based on stakeholder demands is essential for strong connections and successful communication.

Building ethical stakeholder relationships on trust, collaboration, and information sharing. Effective communication may improve responsibility and trust by using targeted messages and involving stakeholders, according to the study. This recommends that the DWS should emphasise transparent and consistent stakeholder communication to develop strong connections. Stakeholder interaction is reactive and needs-driven at the DWS. This implies the DWS only engages with stakeholders as necessary rather than proactively creating connections and satisfying their requirements. Building stakeholder trust and responsibility requires effective communication. Facilitating stakeholder engagement via purposeful messaging and active participation may strengthen ties. Sharing information with stakeholders helps the DWS create credibility and openness. According to FG1-P6, “delays in terms of responding to queries mainly are that you find people either not confident in talking to certain topics, or the issue of red tape”. Table 5.7 shows the codes which emerged for theme 2.

Table 1.16: Theme 2: Stakeholder engagement and trust building

Theme 2: Stakeholder Engagement and Trust-Building	
Codes	• Stakeholder engagement • Ethical partnership • Building trust • Ensuring transparency • Prioritising ethical relationships • Addressing stakeholder concerns and expectations

The next theme addresses data-driven communication and transparency.

5.3.3 Theme 3: Data-driven communication and transparency

Theme 3 examines the role of data-driven communication to increase transparency

and build trust in the DWS. This theme is crucial because it has the potential to transform the DWS's engagement with its stakeholders and the public. The study discovered that public trust, evidence-based decision-making, and accountability were all dependent on strong data-driven communication. Data are an invaluable asset for public sector organisations, according to the OECD (2019). It facilitates policymaking by serving as a service delivery and managing organisational operations. By taking advantage of strong data visualisation and communication, public institutions may also offer more objective operational insights that enhance transparency and decision-making by their stakeholders (Catton 2024).

Government agencies are also more proactive and better at problem solving by using data-driven strategies to improve service delivery and policy outcomes (Ooijen & Welby 2019). Stakeholders can track the use of public resources, find operational flaws, and hold public departments accountable for their results through transparent data-driven communication (ScienceDirect 2024). This study identified the DWS's inadequate and inconsistent data-driven communication as the key focus area for improvement. The DWS's trustworthiness, along with its capacity to meet its stakeholders' needs for transparency and accountability, would be significantly increased by more robust data communication methods.

FG2-P5 mentioned that, "we use statistics from time to time to drive our messaging," while FG1-P1 stated "we frequently use statistics when discussing water balance information." These quotations prove that the DWS had data available for use in its messaging when the issue was extremely technical or when trying to increase public awareness through certain targeted campaigns.

The DWS's approach to integrating data and data-based communication to support its strategic messaging was further described by participants who mentioned the Day Zero communication campaign. FG1-P5 mentioned, "The department often communicates the information about dam levels as well as water consumption, in particular provinces like the Western Cape, as the dam levels drop, the DWS would communicate that to the City of Cape Town as well as the communities so that they need to reduce their demand and need to increase their water conservation urgently." Another participant shared similar information with reference to using data around water usage, availability, and savings to support marketing efforts, such as the *Water*

Week and *Clear Rivers* communication campaigns. It can thus be deduced that the DWS's marketing mission uses data to further its goal and effectively inspire the needed change in responsible water use among stakeholders.

The study showed that the DWS used data-driven communication approaches and mission marketing to reach and engage their stakeholders through campaigns like *Every Drop Counts*. However, the two main aspects for improvement of the DWS were to make data available not only during campaigns but also for stakeholders and the public through their website. Statistics were used to support messages in specific cases, but the organisation did not have an established process for data availability for stakeholders and the public. FG2-P2 stated, "We do use statistics from time to time when we are trying to drive our messaging, but the absence of a comprehensive theoretical framework and integrated communication strategy limits the department's ability to foster ongoing transparency and accountability." Participants also acknowledged that the use of statistics and factual information improved both communication and trustworthiness.

Participants also pointed out that strong communication was critical to developing trust and increasing accountability. FG2-P2 explained: "[S]takeholders can develop stronger bonds through a deliberate messaging strategy supported by their consistent participation and active involvement." When stakeholders are engaged in the sharing of information on an ongoing basis rather than only during campaigns, the DWS could be aided in building credibility and maintaining public trust.

In conclusion, while the DWS intended to strategically integrate data into its communication efforts, this happened primarily through mission marketing and campaigns. For the DWS to meet stakeholder expectations and ensure robust accountability, it must work on building more robust, consistent, and transparent data-sharing practices (South African Government 2024; OECD 2019). The table below presents codes for theme 3.

Table 1.17: Theme 3: Data-driven communication and transparency

Theme 3: Data-driven communication and transparency	
Codes	• Data-driven communication • Use of statistics and data • Effectiveness of data-driven approach

Building on this section, theme 4 elaborates on communication integration and coordination.

5.3.4 Theme 4: Communication integration and coordination

This theme reveals how the DWS used communication to align, integrate, and harmonise across internal and external stakeholders and to ensure it was coherent, consistent, and collaborative in its communications. The concept of integrated communication was validated by the participants, who highlighted the importance of an internal communication strategy as a foundational element to successful external messaging. These findings align with Niemann-Struweg and Grobler (2007), who demonstrate that integrated communication in South African organisations requires simultaneous vertical and horizontal coordination. Without both dimensions, fragmentation persists at the operational level regardless of intent or individual effort. The findings confirm this dynamic within the DWS context.

FG1-P2 noted: “Every communication strategy begins with an internal communications approach, and this approach intends to engage our employees in the campaign.” This quote suggests that employee engagement is a prerequisite for any communication effort targeted at the public. Integration and its ability to support the organisation’s broader goals were demonstrated. FG1-P6 recommended “the implementation of ‘mission marketing’ to clearly convey the DWS’s primary objectives to various stakeholders”. The integration of statistics and data into direct communication campaigns via a data-driven approach is recommended. This not only supports the effectiveness and credibility of the messaging but also improves it. FG1-P6 emphasised that “it is important to have internal integration within the organisation to ensure that the external implementation will be effective”. This suggests that successful implementation depends on well-aligned internal communication to support external communication.

The participants’ responses to how effective the DWS was in communicating with and customising its messages to specific groups of stakeholders differed. Some participants highlighted the effectiveness of the DWS in utilising appropriate language and platforms for audiences. In this regard FG2-P5 said, “[I]n the region, we try to tailor

the messages specifically for the regional context.” On the other hand, others noted problems with inconsistent messaging and responsiveness. FG1-P1 stated, “stakeholders often seek clarity on the conflicting messages”.

Opportunities for enhanced collaboration across government departments were identified. This was demonstrated by FG2-P4: “[T]hrough the integrated communication between the DWS and the Department of [Basic] Education, we can reach more schools and attract an increasing number of learners interested in pure medicine.” This quote serves as an example of how effective communication integration can improve outreach and engagement in other sectors.

In essence, the analysis justifies the need for enhanced communication integration and coordination within the DWS internally and with stakeholders externally. This is in light of the importance of an internal communication strategy as a foundational element to align and engage employees with the campaigns, as highlighted by FG2-P2: “Every communication strategy begins with an internal communications approach, and this approach intends to engage our employees in the campaign.” In addition, the findings support the examples of successful integrated communication (e.g., with the Department of Basic Education), further justifying the benefit of coordinated efforts. This can justify the need for a central communication hub that coordinates and aligns messaging across all communication channels and stakeholders.

The findings underscore the importance of internal communication strategies as a foundational element for any communication. These strategies are key to driving employee engagement and supporting external communication efforts. This point was highlighted by FG1-P4, who noted that “... the department must have a cohesive communication strategy that aligns with its overarching objectives”. This statement justifies the importance of engaging stakeholders in departmental activities. This would ensure transparency and create a sense of shared responsibility. As FG2-P6 noted: “[I]nvolving our stakeholders in our initiatives will promote accountability.” However, there is a clear need for a stakeholder management strategy that incorporates an integrated communication plan to help optimise our efforts.

Participants all agreed that integrated communication was essential and that internal communication strategies were the foundation of successful external messaging. This is validated in the response of FG1-P5: “The internal comms [communication]

approach aims to drive our employees into the campaign.” Employee engagement is thus a necessary component of any communication effort targeted at the public.

The study presented integrated communication and its effect on the DWS’s broader goals. It is recommended that mission marketing be implemented to communicate the DWS’s core objectives to different stakeholders in addition to utilising statistics and data to direct communication campaigns through a data-driven approach. This would not only support but also improve the effectiveness and credibility of the messaging. The successful implementation of this integrated approach is based on efficient internal communication for alignment and external communication support.

These findings are supported by Niemann-Struweg and Grobler (2007), who show that integrated communication in South African organisations requires simultaneous vertical and horizontal coordination to be effective. Without both dimensions, fragmentation persists regardless of the quality of individual engagement events. The integrated communication framework in Chapter 6 addresses this directly through its vertical and horizontal integration component, which introduces specific coordination mechanisms absent from the DWS’s current practice. Table 5.9 present the codes for theme 4.

Table 1.18: Theme 4: Communication integration and coordination

Theme 4: Communication integration and coordination	
Codes	• Communication Integration • Coordination • Internal communication integration • Benefits to stakeholders

The next section discusses theme 5, namely balancing stakeholder interests and expectations.

5.3.5 Theme 5: Balancing stakeholder interests and expectations

This theme identified tensions experienced by the DWS concerning engaging and communicating with stakeholders. There were tensions between encouraging stakeholders to save water and the DWS’s awareness of the impact of specific water-intensive industries if they were to decrease their water use.

There were also statements about the challenges associated with managing

expectations from stakeholders who had different objectives that did not necessarily align with DWS's water conservation efforts. For example, FG2-P3 said that, "as a department, we are for saving water; we want people to save water as much as possible". This participant continued, saying that with the implementation of certain water conservation practices, more water was used. FG2-P3 also referred to the mixed messaging from various government departments: "[T]he moment people start following the five steps of washing hands, we realise that more water is being used by following the steps."

The challenges of managing and aligning the varied interests of different stakeholders were also highlighted. For example, FG2-P5 said that, "for stakeholders, being water efficient might affect production". This participant conveyed that the DWS had find a way to deal with this potential conflict between improving efficiency and the economic interests of specific stakeholders. The participants also stated that the DWS had to find ways of incentivising stakeholders to support the DWS's efforts to be more water-efficient. FG2-P6 suggested that "one of the things that we have had to introduce is incentives to encourage them to be more water efficient". This statement relates to this theme on the challenges the DWS experienced when communicating with external stakeholders. It further identified some challenges the DWS faced in managing conflicting interests and requests of specific stakeholders, like mining, agriculture, and the private sector. This finding is important because it points to the challenges of stakeholder engagement and how the DWS should prioritise the recipients of its communication and the messaging conveyed. This finding aligns with Freeman (1984), who argues that organisations operating within complex stakeholder environments must develop mechanisms for identifying, prioritising, and responding to competing interests rather than treating all stakeholders as a uniform constituency.

The tension between conservation objectives and the economic needs of water-intensive industries demonstrated in participants' accounts reflects precisely the kind of competing claims that stakeholder theory identifies as inherent to multi-stakeholder governance. Jones, Harrison and Felps (2018) further argue that organisations applying instrumental stakeholder theory must move beyond reactive prioritisation toward structured processes for aligning stakeholder interests with organisational values. This requires communication strategies that are both transparent about trade-offs and deliberate in how they sequence stakeholder engagement. Niemann-Struweg

and Grobler (2007) add that integrated communication provides the coordination mechanism through which such competing demands can be managed consistently ensuring that no single stakeholder group receives contradictory messaging about the organisation's priorities. Together, these perspectives confirm that the DWS's challenge in balancing water conservation imperatives against sector-specific economic realities is not merely an operational tension but a fundamental stakeholder communication problem that a structured, integrated framework is well positioned to address.

The results indicate how conflicts sometimes arise when trying to address different stakeholders' interests and expectations. FG2-P3 stated that, in some instances, the practice of saving water might increase the use of water. The codes for theme 5 are tabulated below.

Table 1.19: Theme 5: Balancing stakeholder interests and expectations

Theme 5: Balancing stakeholder interests and expectations	
Codes	• Addressing competing interests • Resolving conflicts • Conflicting stakeholder interests • Reactionary communication approach

Moving beyond the methodological issues raised above, a synthesis of the salient findings that emerged from the data is presented next.

5.4 SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings of the study, as informed by thematic analysis of both the focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews, and discusses them in line with the objectives of the study, drawing on stakeholder theory (Donaldson & Preston 1995; Freeman 1984). The aim of this discussion is to show how the findings link to the proposed integrated communication framework.

5.4.1 Strengths of the current communication approach

Despite the various challenges, the DWS's approach had several notable strengths that aligned with the principles of integrated communication and stakeholder theory. The department had several stakeholder categories, namely municipalities, NGOs, the

private sector, water-user associations, and research institutions. Participants noted that, while the DWS's communication was not perfect (section 5.8.2), the organisation could solicit diverse perspectives and adopt a more holistic approach to policy development and water resource management. Such an approach is in line with Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, which postulates that all organisations would realise better results when they consider different stakeholder interests and needs. This perspective is supported by recent empirical studies in South African water governance contexts (Adomb & Simatele 2022).

Platforms for multistakeholder engagement are embedded in the Gauteng Drought Consultative Forum and the SWPN. Though participants highlighted some challenges with these platforms, the DWS consistently held communication forums. The SWPN platform was commended for its shared leadership between the department and the private sector. This enabled different stakeholders to share data, information, and insights and align around the challenge of water scarcity (Moreira *et al.* 2024). As highlighted by the OECD (2019), such structured dialogues are fundamental to supporting public institutions to develop a culture of transparency and accountability.

P5 explained that the DWS had quarterly stakeholder meetings to receive updates on water-use authorisations: "These sessions allow us to align our practices with national water priorities." This participant alluded to the department's routine bilateral meetings with key stakeholders, which supported two-way communication with their sector. This supports Freeman's (1984) argument for the need to have open, transparent, and established communication channels and active involvement of key stakeholders in the organisation's functioning (Bridoux & Stoelhorst 2022).

The DWS Director General had made a deliberate effort to focus on transparency over the previous months. This was commended by participants, who highlighted that the department's credibility was on the rise. P9 said: "The current DWS Director General's willingness to open sector meetings has rebuilt a level of trust eroded by past communication gaps." This shows leadership acumen and recognition of the need to engage with regulated entities through regular, meaningful stakeholder engagement.

The DWS demonstrated the capacity to tailor their communication approach to different stakeholders. For instance, they engaged industry partners with data and technical findings and community-focused messaging with municipalities. This is in

line with the National Communication Strategy Framework (NCSF), which emphasises an audience-specific approach, and with the proposed integrated communication. P5 explained: “Water balance statistics shared during droughts help us prepare locally, even if broader strategies lack consistency.”

5.4.2 Challenges and gaps in current communication approaches

It is also worth noting several key challenges and gaps in the DWS’s current communication practices that must be considered in an integrated communication framework. The first and most shared challenge noted by all interviewees was a lack of consistency in the messaging and communication approach. P3 summarised this: “The department’s communication approach is very scattered and non-integrated, today it’s dam levels, tomorrow it’s sending out a questionnaire to consult on new policy proposals, but there is no thread that ties all of these communications together.” This could be perceived, as the DWS’s communication approach was largely reactive. This is also reflected in previous studies that showed that a failure to consider how different government departments communicate with external stakeholders can result in fragmentation, inconsistency, and the erosion of trust (Zarewa 2019). In turn, this leads to disengagement among other key stakeholders.

Most of the information shared by the DWS was top-down, thus offering little room for feedback from stakeholders. FG2-P2 added: “We are informed about things and policies here and there, but it is all information flowing out of the DWS without our opinions being considered.” These findings are contrary to NCSF’s (2025) call for transformation towards participatory governance with room for structured forums that enable meaningful and sustained engagement in water policy and regulatory co-creation (Markowska *et al.* 2023). This approach is already successfully piloted in other countries in the region, such as Kenya, in the water sector.

Although the DWS identified and engaged with key external stakeholder groups, there was no systematic approach to mapping out needs by sector. As noted by P5, “messages being shared with farmers are very similar to those that are being shared with mining industries, and even though they both fall under external stakeholders, the approach shouldn’t be the same”. From this, it can be deduced that, while the DWS’s identification and engagement with external stakeholders were systematic, it did not

necessarily align with or was adequately informed by the distinct mandates of different stakeholder groups from the organisation's sectoral perspective (water versus sanitation). According to Freeman, Harrison and Wicks (2007), this would involve developing tailored communication needs and approaches for each key external stakeholder group (farmers, mining, urban water, environmental organisations, etc.).

The DWS's communication approach seemed to downplay environmental issues and concerns, despite their growing centrality and relevance to all aspects of water governance. Key external stakeholders noted a lack of conversation on water re-use, climate change adaptation, and drought tolerance in DWS communication. For example, one of the interviewees pointed out that water re-use and greywater were not a part of this discussion, despite these being the major focus areas of a recently published National Water Resource Strategy (WRC 2024).

The DWS's lack of financial and technical resources for implementing integrated communication can also make it more difficult for the organisation to fully meet these external stakeholder expectations and needs (GoodmanLantern 2025). As the organisation was already resource-constrained, it lacked the financial and technical capability to be more proactive about stakeholder mapping and analysis by industry or the means to customise the approach for each stakeholder. This resource deficit is one of the root causes of the disconnect between DWS approaches and communication and the complex external realities of the water governance field.

Information gaps between DWS directorates and between DWS regional offices and the national DWS also led to a communication vacuum that was often filled by largely speculative information and could lead to confusion and mistrust among external stakeholders (Woon & Pang 2017). This is because, in the absence of credible information or clear communication from the DWS, external stakeholders were left to make inferences based on the interests and intentions of other departments or public sentiment, neither of which was necessarily favourable to the DWS.

All of these challenges are interlinked in some way, as the lack of proactive and complete stakeholder mapping across the different sectors in which the DWS operated was intensified by a lack of resources the department struggled with (symptomised by a disjointed approach to communications) and the internal organisational fragmentation that had, up until the time of this study, not prioritised effective

integrated communications (Gregory *et al.* 2020).

Taken together, these findings confirm that the DWS's current integrated communication approach is fragmented, reactive, and insufficiently attentive to differentiated stakeholder needs. The synthesis points to five interconnected areas where the proposed integrated communication framework, presented in Chapter 6, offers structured responses: stakeholder identification and communication needs analysis; ethical partnership building through consistent engagement; vertical and horizontal coordination mechanisms; selective application of strategic communication drivers; and environmental and contextual alignment with water governance imperatives.

5.5 SUMMARY

This chapter presented the research findings. The data were analysed by means of thematic analysis, which yielded five themes: stakeholder identification and analysis; stakeholder engagement and trust building; communication practices and challenges; ethical partnerships; and an integrated communication framework. The findings were supported by key quotes to show commonalities across the interviews and to provide insight into the communication processes and external stakeholders' perspectives. The synthesis of findings revealed that the findings aligned with stakeholder theory, according to Freeman's description, in that, when the DWS recognised the diversity of stakeholders and their priorities, ethical and cooperative relationships could be formed. The findings provided a solid empirical basis for the development of an integrated communication framework (Chapter 6).

CHAPTER 6. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the integrated communication framework that constitutes the main research output of this study. It draws on the meta-theoretical framework (Chapter 2), the critical literature review (Chapter 3), and the empirical findings (Chapter 5) to propose a framework for integrated external stakeholder communication at the Department of Water and Sanitation.

6.2 AN INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK FOR DWS

This framework has resulted from iterative engagement with the findings reported in the previous chapter. The integrated communication framework can address recent critiques of instrumental stakeholder theory (Jones *et al.* 2018). It builds on Freeman's (1984) original principles to include the dimensions of time and context in partner collaborations. This refined theory is a noteworthy academic contribution that shows how communication integration works in resource-constrained public-sector settings rather than just an adaptation of existing theory. The proposed communication framework reflects how the theoretical concepts were adapted to deal with practical challenges faced in the field.

This section explains the key components of the integrated communication framework. Each component exhibits the participants' inputs and bridges the existing gaps in communication practices. The discussion is supported by relevant literature. Guided by this integrated framework, organisations can enhance internal alignment and strengthen relationships with external stakeholders, ultimately improving performance and satisfaction.

6.2.1 Stakeholder identification needs analysis and categorisation

The integrated communication component focused on "identification and analysis of stakeholders" (section 3.5.5), taking a more general approach, following Phillips and Wicks (2005) and Welch and Jackson (2007). It further, emphasises "systematic stakeholder mapping and categorisation, with primary/secondary distinction" grounded in empirical insights. Participants raised issues about fragmented

identification, noting that, although the National Water Strategy outlined stakeholder mandates, a consistent approach was needed for stakeholder identification and evaluation.

The proposed integrated communication recognised that the DWS identified a range of stakeholders, including municipalities, NGOs, the private sector, and water users, with a systematic categorisation method. Participants noted a significant gap and advocated for a standardised, comprehensive stakeholder mapping exercise, necessitating an enhancement to the component to distinguish primary and secondary stakeholders. Primary stakeholders are directly impacted by water policies and decisions, while secondary stakeholders are indirectly affected.

Participants emphasised the DWS's inconsistency in stakeholder identification. Despite the National Water Strategy outlining stakeholders' mandates, a consistent approach is needed to identify and evaluate stakeholders. This finding underscored the need for a more structured categorisation process. Stakeholder identification includes the systematic mapping processes that categorise stakeholders into the following groups:

- Primary groups (directly affected): municipalities, water users, communities
- Secondary groups (indirectly affected): NGOs, research institutions, donor agencies

This framework draws on Mitchell *et al.*'s (1997) stakeholder salience model, which categorises stakeholders based on power, legitimacy, and urgency attributes. The proposed component integrated Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, which underlines that effective engagement requires understanding stakeholders' varying levels of influence. This theoretical foundation supports the systematic approach introduced in the integrated communication framework. The framework combined Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory with Bryson's (2004) techniques for identifying stakeholders, addressing the DWS's need for tailored communication strategies. The component included sector-specific analysis (energy, agriculture, mining), as Brown and Forster (2012) suggest for strategic planning alignment.

6.2.2 Fostering ethical partnerships through stakeholder engagement

The consolidates elements based on empirical findings that trust building and

engagement are deeply intertwined. Several participants emphasised that ethical partnerships could not exist without sustained engagement. Stakeholders can develop stronger bonds through a deliberate messaging strategy supported by consistent participation.

Findings revealed that, while DWS had platforms like the WSSLG and stakeholder bilaterals, their irregular convening hindered trust. The proposed integrated communication emphasises regular engagement platforms, transparent practices, and feedback mechanisms, which an integrated communication did not explicitly address. In contrast, stakeholders valued the SWPN, chaired by the private sector, but criticised inconsistent DWS stakeholder engagement meetings, leading to the integrated communication framework's emphasis on strategic consistency in platform management. This finding revealed that trust building requires integrated engagement platforms rather than standalone partnerships.

The integrated communication builds on the Arnstein (1969) ladder of citizen participation, narrow focus on instrumental stakeholder theory. It integrates Jeffrey's (2009) concept of listening to stakeholder concerns and Keremidchiev's (2021) caution against the superficial engagement issues observed in DWS practices, as noted through participant feedback.

Engagement platforms form an essential part of the first element. The water sector has numerous platforms it can utilise for stakeholder engagement, including community forums and sector-specific bilaterals. The DWS should ensure that engagement platforms such as community-based forums at the local level, stakeholder consultation platforms at the provincial level, and the WSSLG at the national level which are indicated as valuable by stakeholders, are convened regularly to ensure strategic consistency. Regular meetings are held to ensure continuing dialogue. Furthermore, the DWS should further explore internal consultation platforms to share information between internal DWS branches, coordinate projects, and programmes within the organisation.

- ***Regular convening of the WSSLG and its task teams***

Ensure interactions with stakeholders are founded on transparency and mutual respect, which involve both communicating intentions clearly and maintaining honesty

regarding challenges while valuing each party's contributions. Furthermore, to gain stakeholder trust, it is imperative to implement transparent practices that promote accountability, improve corporate credibility, and inspire stakeholder trust. Furthermore, through proactive outreach, the DWS can demonstrate clear communication and reliable execution of promised actions to minimise opposition and strengthen partnerships.

The DWS should have partnership agreements and action plans in place. This is where stakeholders and government agree and document their roles and responsibilities. This, in turn, builds trust in the process by creating expectations among actors and encouraging accountability, as there is a better understanding of what each actor should contribute and how this will be achieved. This also enables transparency and allows for regular communication, monitoring, and reporting through having a more formalised structure in which partnerships can take place. In addition, it can also help to build an ethical partnership, as it also allows for collaboration that is based on shared values, equal participation, and decision making.

- ***Mechanisms of transparency and mutual respect***

Establish systems for collecting stakeholder input through surveys, forums, or advisory committees to ensure that their voices are heard and integrated into the organisational decision-making process. Additionally, these mechanisms should be designed in a manner that ensures not only the provision of information regarding organisational problems, but also information about how the organisation is planning to solve them. This way, communication between stakeholders and DWS will not be only reactive but will also promote a sustained stakeholder confidence (Freeman 1984). Respect should also be regularly demonstrated through establishing formal feedback mechanisms and publicly confirming responses to communities' requirements, instead of only 'going through the motions' of stakeholder consultation (Mitchell, Agle & Wood 1997). Holding regular stakeholder forums, enabling more transparent decision making and building more accessible complaint mechanisms will institutionalise the mechanism of accountability to the principle of ethical partnerships (Harrison *et al.* 2018).

- ***Systematic input collection through surveys and forums***

Conduct routine evaluations of stakeholders' needs and concerns, which can guide the DWS's decision-making processes and help to maintain organisational responsiveness to stakeholder expectations through a continuous dialogue. These evaluations need to be customised to each sectoral group into which stakeholders are categorised: energy, agriculture, mining, business, NGOs, and donor agencies. As strategic water users, the energy sector has specific communication needs, and messages must be developed and delivered to meet the energy sector's communication needs. Through the process of continuing engagement, the DWS can address the issue of stakeholder resistance and develop sector-specific communication needs assessments (energy, agriculture, mining). Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, and Donaldson and Preston's (1995) normative stakeholder theory both support this integrated approach, as the former emphasises the need for sustained engagement platforms to achieve meaningful citizen participation and the latter argues for ethical stakeholder relationships that require ongoing dialogue rather than episodic consultation.

- ***Communication needs analysis***

Conduct regular assessments of stakeholder needs and concerns to inform the department's decision-making and ensure organisational responsiveness to stakeholder expectations through ongoing dialogue. These should be tailored to each sectoral group (energy, agriculture, mining, business, NGOs, donor agencies). The energy sector, as a strategic water user, has its own communication needs, and messages should be tailored to meet those needs. Through this process of ongoing engagement, the DWS can counter the tendency of stakeholders to become resistant and disengaged. Do sectoral assessments (energy, agriculture, mining, etc.).

6.2.3 Establishing vertical and horizontal integration

The proposed component (Table 5.8) ensures more specific internal fragmentation mechanisms, which were informed by the findings. The component introduces specific internal coordination mechanisms, given the findings on siloed communications. Participants indicated that each directorate communicated a different thing or

message. Thus, the integrated communication framework had to include more detailed mechanisms on cross-departmental communications and the use of collaborative tools.

The finding on how the nine regional offices and multiple directorates in the DWS were at times not on the same page went against the theoretical framework on assumed readiness for integration. Participants noted a significant coordination gap. A DWS official observed how unaware the regional offices were of the announcements by the head office. In addition, they also noted conflicting messages from the different directorates. All these pushed for more specific and practical integration protocols. The proposed integrated communication framework had to specify the top-down and bottom-up communication systems, the interdepartmental meetings, and the use of project management software as specific integration mechanisms. Furthermore, participants noted that a prerequisite to effective communication was extensive understanding, implying the need for mechanisms to listen to employees' voices.

- ***Vertical integration***

Top-down/bottom-up communication systems with feedback loops are suggested. The DWS needs to put in place communication systems that would allow information to flow seamlessly across all levels of management. This means that there must be a system to allow top management of the DWS to pass information down the line to all the employees. At the same time, there is also a need for a feedback loop to top management from employees at the bottom of the hierarchy. This two-way communication would create an environment where all employees feel that their voices count and are always heard. The DWS would solve the challenge of strategic consistency, eliminating any confusion from within and outside of the DWS, and would communicate messages that reflect the department's strategic intentions and priorities, keeping all stakeholders well-informed and engaged.

- ***Horizontal integration***

Cross-departmental coordination using interdisciplinary teams and collaborative tools. Communication at the same management level can also greatly improve collaboration and knowledge exchange. The DWS can improve horizontal integration through

regular interdepartmental meetings, the use of collaborative tools, such as project management software, and the setting up of cross-functional teams for project-specific tasks. This kind of cross-departmental communication would greatly improve coordination efforts and spark innovation by involving multiple perspectives in problem-solving.

Niemann-Struweg and Globler (2007) already built this idea into their model on integrated communication. The need for simultaneous and effective communication at all management levels is also integrated in Smith's (2012) work on organisational communication. The new component combines the principles of coordination by Degenaar *et al.* (2022) and the cross-cutting communication approach of Vos and Schoemaker (2011) in comparison to the original framework, which was theoretical and based more on ideas. Furthermore, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (2013) were included to emphasise the more significant of the combined effects, in this case, communication, rather than added efforts.

While vertical and horizontal integration mechanisms address internal coordination needs, their primary function in this framework is to ensure that communication reaching external stakeholders is coherent, timely, and contextually consistent. Fragmentation at the internal level generates inconsistent messaging that external stakeholders experience as contradictory or unreliable. The integration imperative is therefore both structural and relational: it requires internal alignment in service of external stakeholder communication quality.

6.2.4 Incorporating strategic drivers for communication integration

The 10 strategic drivers for integrated communication were defined and discussed in section 2.3.3. This section addresses the need to apply these strategic drivers to create an integrated communication strategy for DWS and its stakeholders. It is acknowledged that not all drivers are equally relevant or impactful in the DWS context. Participants emphasised specific requirements, justifying the prioritisation of data-driven marketing, mission-driven marketing, and purposeful interactivity.

The findings indicated that the DWS engaged in mission-marketing initiatives, such as Water Week, Day Zero campaigns, and Sanitation Week. However, it did not adopt a data-driven approach. Participants mentioned utilising dam levels and water usage

statistics during crises, which directly influenced their decisions to revise and prioritise analytics-informed strategies. They expressed significant shortcomings in data-driven communication and strategic consistency.

Though participants reported using statistics in their messaging and campaigns to enhance awareness of water and sanitation issues, they highlighted a lack of consistent messaging. This finding underscores the need to prioritise specific drivers rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach. Additionally, the gap between stakeholder groups with opposing needs, such as conservation versus industrial interests, must be addressed through evidence-based communication.

The proposed integrated communication emphasises that, to integrate communication strategically and successfully, an organisation should prioritise context-specific strategic drivers as explained next.

- ***Establish strategic consistency***

Uniform messaging across all platforms is needed to reinforce brand identity and organisational values. Uniformity in messaging would address stakeholder confusion. Through strategic communication consistency, the DWS ensures that its actions remain faithful to its declared commitments and values to stakeholders. Freeman's (1984) work on stakeholder value creation, with its emphasis on trust-building through organisational consistency, further cements this focus on consistency. The DWS's commitment to stakeholders, rather than just making that commitment known, becomes evident through its consistent, transparent actions, which serve to boost both legitimacy and operational effectiveness.

- ***Involve data-driven marketing***

The DWS should use analytics to inform communication strategies, measure effectiveness, and identify areas for improvement. It should use data-driven marketing to address the gap of stakeholders with opposing needs (conservation versus industry). Through a process of identifying key areas where stakeholder competing interests (e.g., water conservation versus industrial production) applies, the DWS should prioritise communication. Analytics integration would provide for evidence-

based arguments.

Furthermore, using data-driven approaches to present evidence-based arguments that highlight the benefits of water conservation practices without undermining economic interests can foster trust and encourage stakeholder buy-in. The Intergovernmental Relations Act (2005) provides for cooperation between national government departments. The DWS needs to engage departments – such as the Department of Health, the Department of Human Settlements, the Department of Cooperative Government and Traditional Affairs, and the Department of Basic Education – to use the statistics that each has available from their respective sectors.

- ***Aim for mission marketing***

The DWS should align marketing initiatives with the organisation's mission to ensure outreach resonates with the intended audience. Consider digital marketing, using social media not just as a public relations exercise but also to reach diverse audiences. For instance, the DWS should consider utilising social media platforms like TikTok to target young people with key messaging, such as promoting water conservation.

- ***Consider purposive interactivity***

Develop channels for meaningful conversations with stakeholders, promoting reciprocal communication rather than one-way information dissemination. Develop two-way communication channels to replace the top-down approach. Feedback mechanisms, such as emails and newsletters, are crucial for establishing trust with stakeholders.

- ***Create and nourish relationships***

Establish strong connections with both internal and external stakeholders to foster trust and collaboration.

- ***Foster a stakeholder focus***

Tailor communication strategies to meet the needs and expectations of stakeholders, enhancing relevance and engagement through consistent relationship development and maintenance.

- ***Emphasise zero-based planning***

Stay adaptable by making strategic decisions based on current data and stakeholder feedback rather than relying on historical data.

- ***Align cross-functional management***

Foster collaboration among departments to ensure all functions are aligned with communication goals.

- ***Identify core competencies***

Leverage the organisation's most substantial communication capabilities to differentiate and strengthen stakeholder relationships. The DWS should ensure that stakeholders benefit from the knowledge and skills the organisation possesses to align their own organisational decision-making.

- ***Establish integrated agency relationships***

Collaborate with external agencies that specialise in integrated communication to enhance outreach efforts. Ngcobo's (2016) strategic drivers for integrated communication research support this selective approach by proving that organisations are better off when they prioritise drivers that align with their specific challenges. The OECD (2019) data-driven governance framework further validates the emphasis on analytics for integration.

The proposed integrated communication maintains Mebuge's (2018) strategic drivers while also incorporating Sriram and Maheswari's (2013) comprehensive communication planning. It emphasises digital marketing and social media engagement (including the application of TikTok for youth outreach), which is now part of contemporary communication and was not present in the initial literature base.

The use of interdisciplinary teams and collaborative systems is the supportive operational element that allows the 10 strategic drivers to be effective. These operational elements provide the organisation with the institutional structure required to do systematic and integrated stakeholder communication.

6.2.5 Integration between organisation, stakeholders, and environment

The findings showed that the component of environmental integration, specifically climate change and SDG alignment, is a gap (section 4.2). All participants highlighted the importance of climate change and water security, specifically that these should be central to all communications. The development of an integrated communication framework requires thoughtful planning, strategic alignment, and continuous evaluation, as it is not an easy task. The DWS needs to ensure the establishment of vertical and horizontal integration in parallel with strategic drivers, ethical partnerships, stakeholder needs assessment, and improvement of engagement, developing a coherent and integrated communication strategy that aligns with its vision and goals while establishing trust with stakeholders. The holistic strategy should facilitate the ability of the organisation to clearly communicate its messages to stakeholders, navigate challenging situations, and achieve strategic objectives. Table 6.1 illustrates, based on the findings, that the model fosters ethical partnerships and stakeholder engagement.

The integrated communication framework recognises the interconnectedness of both components, which was clear in the findings on how environmental factors have a direct impact on stakeholder concerns. Integration within and outside of the organisation must be managed to make the integration successful. The proposed an integrated communication framework operationalised it through the following.

- ***Internal integration***

The DWS should develop a clear and consistent organisational message that aligns with its core values and strategic objectives, involving top management and communication professionals in its development. This can also include encouraging a culture where DWS employees can represent the organisation's message and be authentic in their delivery.

- ***External integration***

Stakeholders should be encouraged through feedback and financial accountability, while organisational competencies and stakeholder expectations should be managed to improve the flow of communication and trust. Alignment between the expectations

of the stakeholders and the organisation, through clear communication and effective channels, would address the issue of misunderstandings and unmet expectations. The DWS can employ a multichannel engagement strategy by using different methods (e.g., social media, community meetings, stakeholder workshops) to reach the various target audiences. Integration between the DWS, stakeholders, and the environment to address stakeholder concerns and environmental factors should be fostered to develop more sustainable and cooperative solutions. To make this happen, both organisational communication and external environmental factors should be aligned in the communication approach. Environmental factors and stakeholder concerns (e.g., climate change, water security) should be integrated into the DWS's communication strategy. This structured approach should facilitate a comprehensive and systematic analysis, which should inform the development of a strong and integrated communication framework for an integrated communication strategy.

- ***Environment***

The DWS is leading efforts in South Africa's water and sanitation sector to contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 6 (Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all). In fact, it is generally recognised that the achievement of SDG 6 is essential to progress on all 16 SDGs, and vice versa. The sustainable management of water and sanitation services is also critical to broader efforts to eliminate poverty, promote sustainable development, and ensure peace and security.

Communication is one of the essential tools in fulfilling the mandate of the DWS. This can be used effectively by the DWS to achieve the objectives of SDG 6 by 2030. The DWS has been able to mobilise partnerships by attracting engagement from different spheres that are involved with SDG 6. The different spheres include government, private sector, utilities, civil society, research, mining, and agriculture. Collaboration between these spheres is key if we are to effectively achieve our goals. Table 6.1 presents an integrated communication framework based on the study findings.

Table 1.20: Overview of the integrated communication framework for the DWS

Component	Proposed actions on the integrated communication framework
Vertical integration and horizontal integration	• Establish a vertical free flow of communication between different managerial levels, utilising both top-down and bottom-up communication. • Support horizontal free flow of communication to enable and integrate the sharing of knowledge and information.
Incorporating the 10 strategic drivers for communication integration	• Create and nourish relationships • Foster a stakeholder focus • Establish strategic consistency • Consider purposive interactivity • Aim for mission marketing • Emphasise zero-based planning. • Align cross-functional management • Identify core competencies • Involve data-driven marketing • Establish integrated agency
Integration between the organisation, stakeholders, and the environment	• Manage internal integration, including CEO/top management and the renaissance communicator • Aim for external integration • Consider financial accountability, core competencies, data-driven marketing, and stakeholder-conscious employees.
Fostering ethical partnerships with stakeholders Stakeholder engagement	• Prioritise ethical relationships with stakeholders, characterised by trust, cooperation, and information sharing • Consider analysing an organisation and its stakeholders' needs. • Address stakeholder concerns and expectations in organisational decision-making objectives • Enhance accountability and corporate credibility, and build trust among stakeholders
Analysing and categorising stakeholders	• Identify and categorise primary and secondary stakeholders • Analyse stakeholder communication needs.

The subsequent section presents the framework alignment with empirical findings.

6.3 COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK ALIGNMENT WITH EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The proposed integrated communication framework aligns with the empirical findings in Chapter 5. Figure 6.1 illustrates how each element was refined based on the findings. This resulted in an integrated communication framework that addresses real-world

challenges while maintaining theoretical integrity.

The components of the integrated communication framework need to be operationalised to deal with the concrete challenges revealed in the empirical analysis, and the first step for this, stakeholder identification and analysis, is the basis for successfully implementing all the components of the theoretical framework.

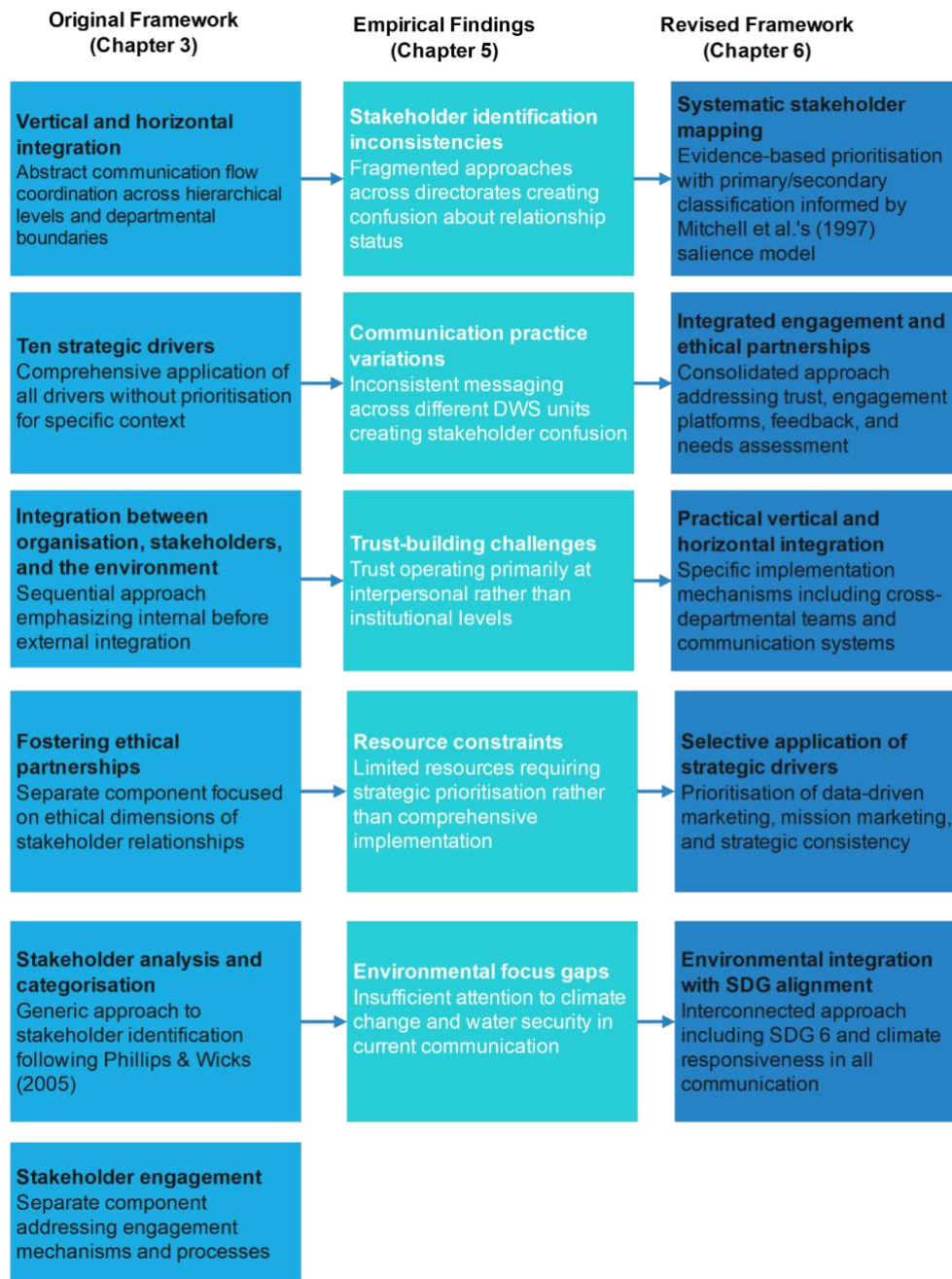


Figure 1.5: Evolution of the theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy

6.3.1 Responding to stakeholder identification challenges

The empirical findings highlighted challenges in stakeholder identification and categorisation. External stakeholders expressed concerns about facing inconsistent approaches, depending on which DWS directorate they dealt with, leading to confusion about their current relationship status. A participant from the energy sector noted that strategic water users had specific communication needs. The findings also indicated that the different directorates had separate stakeholder databases that did not have good coordination.

The proposed communication framework responds to the challenge by including stakeholder mapping procedures that aim to categorise stakeholders into primary and secondary groups. This approach can provide consistency across DWS units while still allowing for necessary tailoring to the different types of stakeholders. The integrated communication framework suggests bottom-up stakeholder identification, as indicated by the findings, to ensure a comprehensive approach rather than the ad hoc methods employed currently.

6.3.2 Addressing communication fragmentation

Both external stakeholders and DWS managers raised concerns about message inconsistency as a communication challenge. External stakeholders reported receiving contradictory information from different directorates, while DWS managers acknowledged the limited coordination mechanisms for ensuring consistent messaging. A participant from the private sector described a situation where the policy directorate told them one thing about water licensing requirements, and the regional office then told them something different.

The integrated communication framework responds to the challenge through its structured vertical and horizontal integration mechanisms. By providing clear communication channels between different hierarchical levels and across departmental boundaries, the integrated communication framework creates a system for information sharing that can prevent contradictory messaging. The emphasis on strategic consistency as a priority driver also supports coherent communication across different DWS units.

6.3.3 Increasing the quality of stakeholder engagement

The responses to communication and stakeholder engagement were mixed in the field, with some focus group participants reporting cases of effective consultation, while others described stakeholder interaction as “tick-box” processes. The study findings confirmed this discrepancy, consultations with external stakeholders were often not coordinated between head office directorates.

The integrated communication framework seeks to address this issue by integrating engagement and ethical partnerships into one component with explicit standards for meaningful stakeholder involvement. The focus on convening of engagement platforms, systematic feedback loops, and communication needs assessment is designed to establish a consistent approach that can be applied across the various DWS directorates. Integrating these areas reflects the finding from the interviews and fieldwork that trust-building and engagement are a part of the same process rather than distinct components of communication.

6.3.4 Responding to resource constraints

Resource constraints were an important limitation from the perspectives of both external stakeholders and DWS managers. External stakeholders reflected the effect of these constraints by reporting slow response times and the outdated nature of communication platforms; DWS managers in the interviews and focus groups described painful trade-offs in resource allocation. One manager explained that, with limited communication resources, they constantly faced difficult choices in terms of prioritising areas for investment.

The integrated communication framework responds to these constraints through an approach of selective application of strategic drivers. Rather than requiring immediate and comprehensive implementation of all elements, the integrated communication framework identified three high-priority strategic drivers that are more feasible to focus resources on while still recognising practical constraints. The suggested phased approach to implementation also responds to the issue of limited resources by recommending progressive development of the communication strategy rather than immediate and extensive transformation.

6.3.5 Including environmental dimensions

Insufficient attention to environmental factors was a recurrent theme for external stakeholders. The findings highlighted lack of communication on themes like water reuse, climate adaptation, drought tolerance, and other areas at the centre of contemporary water governance. Furthermore, the findings indicated that communication on environmental themes was often deprioritised despite its strategic relevance.

The integrated communication framework seeks to address this by making environmental integration an explicit element and emphasising the need to align with SDG 6 and be responsive to climate priorities. In other words, it reflects the empirical finding that environmental and ecological factors are not a separate area of communication but should inform all communication on water governance. The framework also responds to external stakeholders expressed interest in DWS knowledge by including knowledge sharing about environmental problems as a central aspect of trust building. Environmental integration addresses the recurrent theme from both datasets that climate change and water security must inform all stakeholder communication.

6.4 CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

The integrated communication framework developed in this study rests on principles that emerged from the literature review and were refined through empirical findings. The purpose of this section is to evaluate those principles critically against established criteria for conceptual framework rigour. Van der Waladt (2020) argues that a conceptual framework must demonstrate internal consistency, theoretical grounding, empirical coherence, and practical applicability. Each of these criteria is examined below.

6.4.1 Internal consistency

The five components form a coherent whole, with each addressing a distinct dimension of the DWS communication challenges identified in Chapter 5. Each component addresses a distinct dimension of the communication challenge identified

at the DWS. No component duplicates another, and together they address the full range of issues identified in the empirical data.

6.4.2 Theoretical grounding

The framework draws on three validated theoretical sources. Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory provides the normative foundation, Niemann's (2005) model the operational structure, and Barkers (2013) drivers the strategic priorities. These three layers are analytically distinct and do not collapse into one another, strengthening the theoretical coherence of the framework.

6.4.3 Empirical coherence

Every component of the framework maps onto themes that emerged from the empirical data. Stakeholder identification needs analysis responds to findings in Theme 1. Ethical partnerships respond to findings in Theme 4. Vertical and horizontal integration responds to findings in Theme 3. Strategic drivers respond to findings in Theme 5. Environmental alignment responds to the contextual findings across both datasets. This empirical grounding means the framework is not a purely theoretical construct; it is an analytical response to observed practice. These alignments are documented in sections 6.3.1 to 6.3.5.

6.4.4 Practical applicability

The framework is designed for implementation within a national government department operating under constitutional mandates and resource constraints. It accounts for the institutional realities that distinguish the DWS from commercial organisations for which existing models were primarily developed. The phased implementation plan (Section 6.6) operationalises this practically, identifying responsible parties, timeframes, and measurable success indicators for each component.

The convergence of contemporary stakeholder theory developments with integrated communication scholarship creates opportunities for developing theoretically sophisticated frameworks that address postcolonial public sector communication challenges. Patzer *et al.*'s (2018) work on normative stakeholder engagement

provides foundations for understanding how authentic dialogue can be institutionalised within complex governance systems. Rose *et al.*'s (2018) e-government stakeholder framework demonstrates how traditional stakeholder categorisations require reconceptualisation when applied to democratic governance contexts where citizens occupy multiple stakeholder roles. In the context of the DWS, this theoretical synthesis suggests that effective integrated communication requires simultaneous attention to Freeman's foundational stakeholder identification processes, Niemann's systematic communication coordination mechanisms, and contemporary insights about power dynamics, cultural responsiveness, and democratic accountability that characterise post-apartheid South African governance environments.

6.5 CONTEXTUAL ADAPTATION FOR SOUTH AFRICAN WATER GOVERNANCE

Major changes focus on country-specific contexts and the constraints they create on water governance in South Africa. The developed context-agnostic an integrated communication framework would thus require adjustments for local conditions to be fit for purpose.

6.5.1 Communication for the redress of past wrongs

Unequal service delivery in South Africa creates a backdrop for water governance communication. The proposed integrated communication framework responds to these inequalities by:

- defining stakeholders in an inclusive and bottom-up manner to ensure that marginalised stakeholders are identified and acknowledged
- catering for uneven access to digital communication tools by providing alternative and accessible communication channels
- incorporating language diversity in communication approaches to reflect South Africa's 12 official languages.

These adaptations respond to the empirical finding that identifying and including relevant stakeholders must be done with awareness of historical and power imbalances to have a meaningful impact. For Nkuna (2022), Western conceptions of stakeholder identification and engagement often leave blind spots where the historical

power dynamics of a context are considered.

6.5.2 Communication in line with constitutional rights

Access to water as a basic right, as enshrined in the South African Constitution, sets out certain requirements for the DWS (South Africa 1996, section 27(1)(b)). The integrated communication framework for DWS communication addresses these through:

- a rights-based approach to communication to reinforce the idea that access to water is not a privilege but an entitlement
- mechanisms for transparency in information to support the constitutional right to information
- accountability measures for monitoring rights and services to allow stakeholders to track compliance and rights protection.

This is a response to the empirical finding that the DWS's communication approach needs to support administrative efficiency and a constitutional mandate that seeks to support democratic oversight.

6.6 OPERATIONAL DYNAMICS AND IMPLEMENTATION

The components of the communication framework are linked and create a continuous cycle, as shown in Figure 6.2. The mapping component begins the cycle by creating a system for identifying primary and secondary stakeholders in the water sector. This is in response to the problem of DWS directorates not having a consistent way of identifying stakeholders (fragmentation). It was found that, when these stakeholders moved between different directorates, there was no continuity in the way communication was done. The mapping done is both from the top, where the DWS identifies who their stakeholders are, and from the bottom, where the stakeholders are identified by themselves. This is contrary to how it was done currently in the department at the time of this study – that is, when it was needed, or when someone had time. The findings showed that it is important to identify stakeholders systematically, especially when these strategic water users have particular communication needs (Freeman 1984; Phillips & Wick 2005).

Similarly, the selection of the strategic drivers is done hand in hand with stakeholder mapping to set the basis and parameters for the activities done afterwards. It was also clear from the study that government departments would reap great rewards when they focus on the strategic drivers that best suit their challenges, as opposed to implementing all of them (Ngcobo 2016). The three strategic drivers that have been included in the integrated communication framework are relationship building, focus on stakeholders, and strategic consistency, but an integrated communication framework also includes some modern-day elements for information sharing, such as social media, which could be used as an engagement tool for youth. This is a more evidence-based approach than implementing all the drivers, as it is more difficult to do all when there are not enough resources in the public sector.

Vertical and horizontal integration are interconnected, and this was confirmed by the findings of the study. Both address fragmentation, which the study participants indicated was a communication problem. There can be no vertical integration without horizontal integration, and vice versa. The former would only cause more confusion, as different levels of the DWS would not be on the same page. Horizontal integration, on the other hand, would not work if it did not include consistency with the other directorates and business units of the department. The study shows that the environment can cause a stakeholder concern that would cut across all these boundaries. This requires both vertical and horizontal integration to get a coordinated communication output.

Environmental and SDG integration, from a theoretical perspective, was a significant improvement on an integrated communication framework. Most of the study participants identified climate change and water security as major factors that had an impact on almost everything that happened in the water sector. In a changing climate (OECD 2019), these elements should, therefore, be integrated when considering communication with stakeholders. The environment and SDGs are cross-cutting, and all activities of communication practitioners should take these factors into account. This integration is a nod to the interconnectedness of these environmental issues to stakeholder needs, and this also shows that, in a complex water governance space, climate change, for example, has become a stakeholder concern that should be considered in the management of stakeholder relations.

Information management provides the necessary structure for information sharing, and more particularly, the system that would be in place for information to be managed, so there is no information vacuum. The information gap or vacuum is one of the gaps that was identified in the study, as communication sometimes became difficult for the department when one directorate did not know what the other was doing. The study also showed that, when this happened, stakeholders were likely to make up their own information or narrative, and this was rarely in the DWS's favour. Stakeholders assume what other departments do (possibly based on their interests and intentions) and form an opinion based on this. They could also make assumptions based on public sentiment that again could be harmful to the DWS.

Ethical partnerships are when stakeholder engagement is operationalised, and all stakeholders have been identified and communication has begun. This component has all the ethical imperatives that an integrated communication framework suggests that communication practitioners should take seriously if they are to build healthy and sustainable relationships with their stakeholders. Partnerships, most importantly, ethical partnerships, should not be transactional but nurtured in the case of the engagement with rural communities (Harrison *et al.* 2018). Trust would, therefore, must be built as part of a continuous process and not a one-off after some act or event. It also becomes easier to have an ethical and cooperative relationship when the DWS recognises that not all stakeholders are the same and may have different priorities.

Monitoring and evaluation must be a continuous cycle for an integrated communication framework to be a continuous one, as shown in Figure 6.2 below. It is the component that would allow the DWS to determine how it is doing regarding communication with stakeholders and provide opportunities for improvement where necessary. The communication efforts themselves must be evaluated, as well as the stakeholder response to the DWS's communication efforts. By monitoring these efforts, the DWS would be able to respond to the stakeholders' communication needs. This is because stakeholder needs may not be constant and may change with the environment or other external factors. The integrated communication model is depicted in Figure 6.2.



Figure 1.6. The comprehensive integrated communication framework for DWS

This figure above is a visual depiction of the integrated communication framework for DWS. The integrated communication framework potentially contributes to theoretical integration by demonstrating how communication systems must adapt to resource-constrained environments while maintaining ethical standards and democratic accountability. Research shows that successful stakeholder integration depends not only on systematic processes but also on genuine commitment to participatory governance principles that recognise stakeholder agency within complex political and environmental contexts. The framework creates a continuous cycle of monitoring and

evaluation, as shown in figure 6.2, ensuring responsiveness to changing stakeholder needs.

6.7 FRAMEWORK ALIGNMENT WITH DWS CONTEXT

Figure 6.3 illustrates how each component of the integrated communication framework maps onto the specific operational context of the DWS. The alignment confirms that the framework is not a generic model transposed from other contexts but is grounded in the specific governance, resource, and relational realities of a South African national water and sanitation department.



Figure 1.7: Framework alignment with DWS context

Figure 6.3 maps each component of the integrated communication framework against the specific operational context of the DWS. Figure 6.3 demonstrates that the framework is tailored to the DWS's constitutional mandates, resource constraints, and stakeholder diversity.

6.8 PROPOSED IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Figure 6.4 presents a phased implementation plan for the integrated communication framework. The three phases correspond to immediate priorities (stakeholder mapping and needs assessment), medium-term goals (integration mechanisms), and long-term outcomes (institutionalised integrated communication practice). Each phase identifies responsible units and measurable indicators.

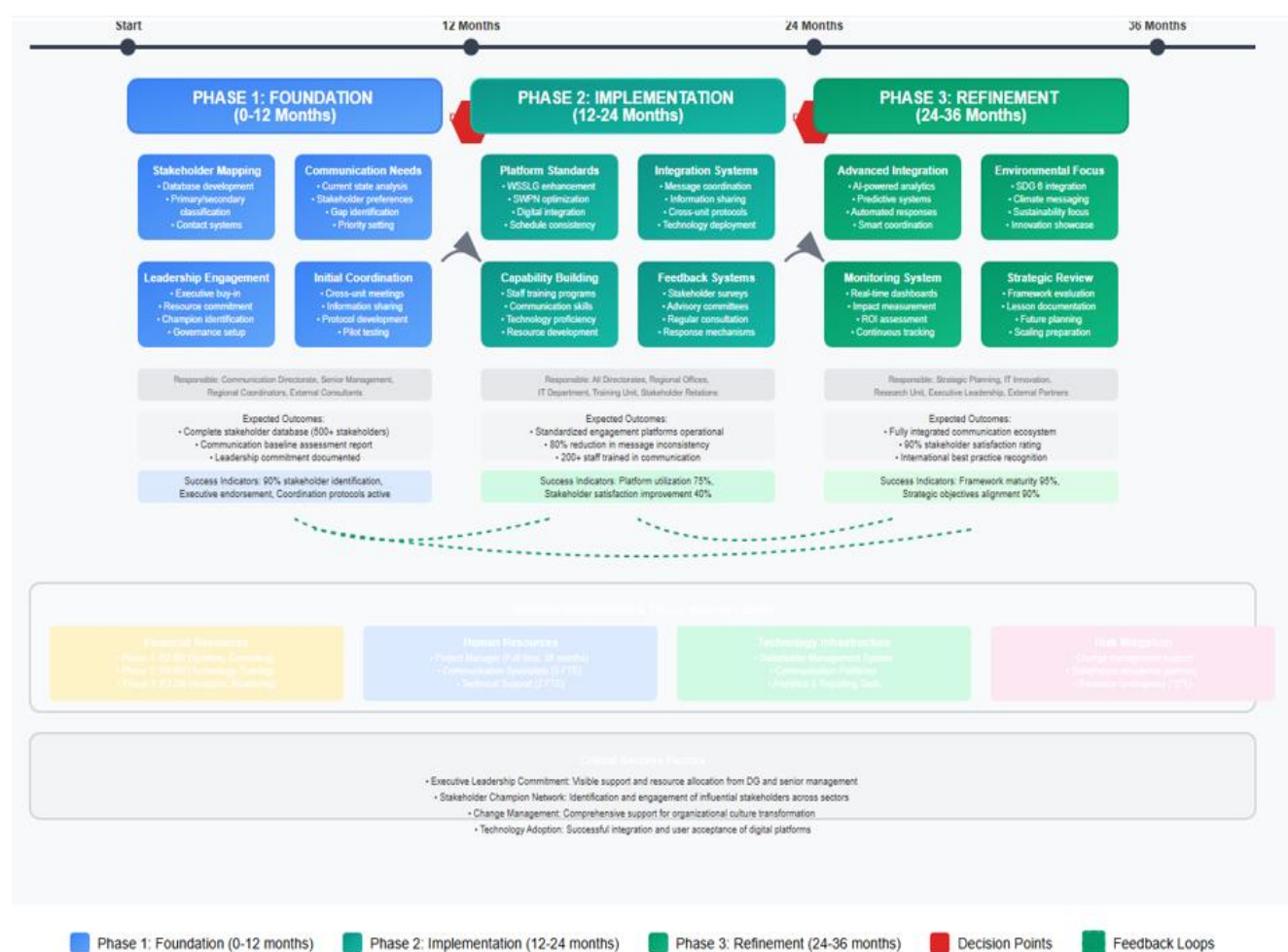


Figure 1.8: Framework Implementation Plan

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on the proposed integrated communication framework for DWS.

Figure 6.4 presents a phased implementation plan. The next section presents a summary of the chapter.

6.9 SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter was to present an integrated communication framework for the DWS. This chapter has answered the primary research question. The chapter outlined the key components of the communication framework. The integrated communication framework makes key adaptations to account for the South African context, specifically the country's legacy of inequality, constitutional imperatives, resource constraints, and government structures. An integrated communication framework is both theoretically sound and operationally applicable and, therefore, contextual and relevant to the challenges of communicating water governance in South Africa. By building on previous theoretical work and adapting to the empirical challenges posed, the suggested integrated communication framework makes a theoretical and practical/applied contribution to the field as regards integrated communication for stakeholder management. The next chapter concludes the study.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 6, the research findings were presented and discussed. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of the study. Conclusions drawn from the key findings guide the discussion. Furthermore, the chapter highlights how the findings contribute to both theory and practice in the field of organisational communication and stakeholder management, in this case, in the context of water governance. Finally, recommendations are made.

7.2 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

This study examined how the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) could integrate its external stakeholder engagement efforts through an integrated communication framework. The study was motivated by documented fragmentation in DWS communication practices, identified through a 2018 independent stakeholder audit, and confirmed through a qualitative investigation involving ten semi-structured interviews with external stakeholders and two focus group discussions with DWS communication managers. An interpretivist paradigm guided the inquiry. Thematic analysis identified five themes: stakeholder identification and analysis; stakeholder engagement and trust-building; communication practices and challenges; ethical partnerships; and the development of an integrated communication strategy. The findings confirmed that current DWS communication practices are reactive, directorate-specific, and insufficiently attentive to differentiated stakeholder communication needs. A revised six-component integrated communication framework was developed in response. The framework is grounded in Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, Niemann's (2005) strategic integrated communication model, and Barker's (2013) strategic communication drivers, and adapted for the post-colonial, resource-constrained governance context of the South African water sector.

7.3 ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question: How should the Department of Water and Sanitation integrate its external stakeholder engagement efforts, has been answered in Chapter

6.

The study sought to answer the following research sub-questions:

- i) How does the DWS integrate its external stakeholder communication?

The study strove to answer this sub-question by means of data collected through two focus group discussions with internal stakeholders and 10 interviews with external stakeholders. The data showed that the DWS's process of stakeholder communication integration had encouraging attributes but was tainted by deep-rooted systemic issues.

The DWS's current process of stakeholder identification was fragmented and directorate-specific rather than holistic. In other words, various directorates and units had their own stakeholder lists, but they did not intersect or talk to each other. The DWS, despite the mentioned coordination challenges, had created important platforms for engaging stakeholders. The two important platforms that were mentioned by participants were the WSSLG and the SWPN. However, there was a lack of consistency in their implementation, such as meeting scheduling, and an issue of platform cancellation without consultation.

Analysis of stakeholder communication practices within the DWS's highlighted both differences and similarities in the ways in which communication transpired. This included the usage of different communication channels and disparities in the content of communication messages. The department had multiple communication channels available, but there was little evidence that these were used with any strategic coordination. The differences in messages from various DWS units were a major problem, as external stakeholders received conflicting information.

The above empirical findings indicate that, despite the DWS's awareness of and interest in stakeholder communication integration, its actual operational practices were characterised by ad hoc rather than strategic approaches. The DWS's organisational structure, consisting of nine provincial offices and multiple technical directorates, created an inherent coordination challenge that must be addressed through explicit integration efforts.

- ii) How do external stakeholders perceive their current communication engagements with the DWS?

The findings revealed diverse stakeholder perceptions regarding communication with

the DWS. Stakeholder experiences of DWS communication varied. Some stakeholders reported a level of satisfaction with the structured engagement platforms and the provision of technical information. In contrast, others expressed higher levels of dissatisfaction, particularly regarding access to timely and contextually relevant information. Relationship quality emerged as a significant aspect of stakeholder perceptions, with a consistent emphasis on trust, consistency, and responsiveness. The distinction between trust in individuals and trust in the DWS as an institution was acknowledged. Some participants indicated that their relationships with certain officials were stronger and more personal than with the DWS as a whole. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of stakeholder perceptions, highlighting that stakeholder views extend beyond binary satisfaction measures to include elements of relationship quality, information accessibility, and the meaningfulness of engagement.

- iii) What should a normative framework for integrated communication between the DWS and its stakeholders constitute?

The findings revealed four main interlinked challenges and five opportunities that affected the DWS's ability to implement external stakeholder communication. The DWS's institutional structure was one of the main challenges to communication integration. Fragmentation at both the vertical and horizontal levels of the DWS organisation hindered communication and coordination. The second main challenge was the lack of resources, including staff, technological systems, and the capacity to engage. The third challenge was the inconsistency and lack of integration in the DWS's communication strategy with its stakeholders. The messages shared by the department were reactive, and no integrated communication strategies were followed. As a result, when an issue arose and the communication around it was not clear or changed at each directorate or level of governance, stakeholders got confused and lost trust in the DWS. The lack of cohesive communication strategies meant that there was no method of systematising stakeholder relationships to facilitate collaborating with stakeholders in a manner that would improve policy implementation and enforcement. The fourth challenge was information and communication vacuums/information gaps between directorates in the DWS and national and provincial DWS offices. This further eroded stakeholder confidence, resulting in negative stakeholder perceptions and resistance to DWS initiatives. The lack of standardised information-sharing practices and feedback mechanisms prevented

stakeholders from receiving the required information in a timely and accurate manner.

The first exogenous opportunity was that the drought and attention to climate change had generated an increased interest from the public in water security issues. The benefit of this would be realised if DWS had a willing audience to talk to regarding water issues. This creates the potential for lowering barriers to access and motivating stakeholders, and for a more receptive environment within which to have the necessary conversation about water. Increased public interest in water has the potential to better integrate stakeholders. Stakeholders are more likely to be motivated to engage in communication processes when water security is of greater priority to them. The use of an integrated communication strategy for water security is contingent on the level of stakeholder engagement. The second opportunity is policy. In South Africa, the Constitution states that access to water and participation are rights; thus, these could be used as guidelines for stakeholder engagement. Third, the DWS had existing engagement platforms, such as the WSSLG and the SWPN, which were opportunities to further strengthen engagement with stakeholders. Fourth, there was a trend towards digital transformation that could be an opportunity to improve the accessibility of information and the efficiency of engagement. The final systemic opportunity identified was leadership. According to participants, stakeholder engagement on water governance was an opportunity if there was leadership buy-in.

The above-mentioned challenges and opportunities were the basis for the development of the integrated communication, and the focus was on the practical mechanisms of its implementation rather than a utopian version, which would involve conditions that did not exist on the ground.

The proposed framework (Chapter 6) answers this question by offering a comprehensive approach to integrated communication that is grounded in theory and informed by empirical insights. The framework holistically addresses five interrelated dimensions of integrated communication in the context of stakeholder management: stakeholder identification and analysis; stakeholder engagement and relationship building; vertical and horizontal coordination; strategic prioritisation; and environmental alignment. The key components of the framework are systematic stakeholder mapping and primary/secondary classification; integrated stakeholder engagement and ethical partnerships; pragmatic vertical and horizontal integration

mechanisms; selective and strategic application of drivers; and environmental integration with SDG alignment. Additionally, it provides practical guidelines for implementation, including a phased approach to the framework's application and a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities of various organisational units.

This communication framework makes a significant contribution to the theoretical advancement of integrated communication in stakeholder management contexts, as well as to the practical implications for and application in the DWS. By building upon existing theoretical foundations and addressing specific empirical challenges identified in the study, the communication framework not only enriched scholarly knowledge but also offered actionable guidance for DWS practitioners to enhance stakeholder communication and engagement in alignment with its strategic objectives.

In response to the primary research question: How should the Department of Water and Sanitation integrate its external stakeholder engagement efforts? this study proposes the integrated communication framework presented in Chapter 6. The framework offers a structured, empirically grounded approach that addresses the specific governance, resource, and stakeholder realities of the DWS while drawing on validated theoretical foundations from communication science and stakeholder management.

7.4 SOLVING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

This section discusses how the research questions were reached and how the study contributes to both theory and practice on integrated communication within a stakeholder management context. The research questions were as follows:

- i) How does the DWS currently integrate its external stakeholder communication?

The study offered an in-depth look at the DWS's stakeholder communication integration status, identifying strengths and gaps in communication with external stakeholders. Specific integration mechanisms, such as the WSSLG and the SWPN forums, were described, and coordination challenges arising from organisational structure and resource constraints were identified.

A key finding was the variability of communication integration practices between directorates and regional offices, which led to inconsistent stakeholder experiences.

The study highlighted strengths, such as the existence of structured consultation processes and the sharing of technical information. These issues of structural fragmentation fed directly into the framework's communication coordination component, which targeted vertical/horizontal integration through mechanisms for coordination and cross-departmental collaboration tools.

ii) How do external stakeholders perceive their current engagements with the DWS

Study findings indicated that satisfaction with the DWS varied between stakeholder groups. Private sector partners were more satisfied with their engagement experiences compared to NGOs and community representatives. There was a contrast between process and outcome satisfaction. Stakeholders accepted the engagement despite process problems. They valued the DWS's technical expertise, formalised consultation process, and transparency about challenges. Inconsistencies in responsiveness, lack of feedback, and fragmented messaging contributed to dissatisfaction.

The differences in satisfaction levels among stakeholder groups influenced the stakeholder identification and analysis component of the integrated communication framework. Emphasis was placed on primary and secondary classification to ensure tailored communication strategies that are sensitive to each group's needs and expectations.

iii) What should a normative framework for integrated communication between the DWS and its external stakeholders constitute?

The result of this study, as presented in Chapter 6, is a comprehensive and integrated communication framework for stakeholder management. This communication framework considered all the needs and opportunities highlighted in this study and is linked to existing theory. The main purpose of this framework is to provide detailed instructions, step-by-step approaches, precise definitions of roles and responsibilities, and options for monitoring.

The findings underscored two distinct aspects: fragmentation challenges and integration opportunities. Challenges encompass structural fragmentation, resource constraints, and capability development. These challenges pose operational obstacles

to theoretical models to overcome to be applicable. On the other hand, integration opportunities include existing engagement mechanisms, the potential of digital transformation, and demonstrated leadership commitment. Integration opportunities, therefore, provided beneficial bases for theoretical applications that allow for enabler approaches to be introduced, which build on available strengths as opposed to developing new entities from conception.

The challenges and opportunities directly contributed to the strategic driver component of the communication framework, which places emphasis on resource-efficient approaches and the utilisation of existing mechanisms while considering structural barriers through planned implementation processes.

The integrated design of the communication framework addresses all issues and opportunities through its combined building blocks. This also makes the integrated communication framework more useful for practitioners. It also has a strong theoretical foundation that can help close the gap between theory of stakeholder management and operational problems of water governance. The chapter 6 framework solves the research problem by operationalising stakeholder theory to address DWS communication fragmentation and accountability gap from Chapter 5.

7.5 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study makes the following theoretical contributions to the body of knowledge in the field of stakeholder communication:

- i) **Integrated communication.** The study adds to integrated communication models by applying these to a public sector context that is driven by multiple accountabilities and resource constraints. Models such as those by Barker (2013) and Niemann (2005) provide strong foundations in integrated communication approaches; however, these were developed in corporate contexts, which may not align with the operational environments of public institutions.
- ii) **Stakeholder theory.** The study contributes to stakeholder theory by showing how the concepts developed by Freeman (1984) and later by Harrison *et al.* (2018) can be adapted and re-contextualised for post-colonial governance

structures. The influence of historical power dynamics and structural inequality needs to be acknowledged in how stakeholders are identified and prioritised.

- iii) **Organisational structure and integration.** The study furthered theoretical understanding of the impact of organisational structure on communication integration. It shows that structural factors do have a bearing on integration capacity and that this cannot be expected to occur naturally within an organisational structure without some explicit coordinating mechanisms.
- iv) **Environmental factors and communication integration.** The study contributed to theory by showing the influence of environmental factors on communication integration and how contextual drivers, such as climate change and sustainability, influence stakeholder communication in the water sector.

The study contributes theoretically by adapting stakeholder theory for public sector water governance in post-colonial contexts.

7.6 STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY

The study has several strengths in terms of methodology and concept.

- Qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were employed, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of stakeholder experiences and perspectives.
- Diverse stakeholder perspectives, including participants from the government, private sector, civil society, and academic institutions, were integrated.
- Stakeholder theory and communication concepts were combined to develop a integrated communication framework that considered both the relational and procedural aspects of stakeholder engagement.
- The importance of context was recognised by explicitly addressing the South African socio-political environment that influenced water governance communication.
- It had strong qualitative analysis processes, namely, thematic analysis and triangulation, to ensure rigour.
- It was practice-oriented by providing implementable recommendations and framework components.

7.7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The following potential future research endeavours can expand the understanding of integrated communication practice:

- **Longitudinal studies:** Monitoring of stakeholder communication over longer periods to understand how such relationships and practices evolve through the different phases of policy cycles and leadership changes.
- **Comparative analyses:** Exploration of stakeholder communication practices across various government departments to broaden the understanding of shared challenges and unique contextual elements.
- **Mixed-methods research:** Adoption of mixed-methods approaches – qualitative and quantitative data can provide both depth and breadth to understanding integrated communication efficacy.
- **Implementation research:** In-depth study of the real-world application of the proposed integrated communication framework for DWS to understand practical challenges and its overall effectiveness.
- **Multilevel communication:** Exploration of how communication is integrated or coordinated across the national, provincial, and local government tiers within South Africa's multilevel governance system.
- **Digital transformation:** An in-depth examination of how the advent and integration of digital technologies impact stakeholder communication within the sphere of water governance, including both potential and challenges.
- **Crisis communication:** Researching the dynamics of integrated communication in the face of water-related crises to understand how stakeholder relationships and communication practices hold up or change during such situations.

A priority recommendation is the validation of the integrated communication framework through a mixed-methods follow-up study. Specifically, a quantitative survey instrument based on the five framework components could be administered to a representative sample of DWS external stakeholders to test whether the framework dimensions reflect empirically distinct and measurable constructs. This would allow for

confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and would strengthen the framework's claim to generalisability beyond the single case study context. Alternatively, action research embedding the framework within a DWS regional office over a 12-month period would provide longitudinal evidence of its practical applicability and adaptability.

7.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

7.8.1 Theoretical significance

The theoretical significance of this study lies not in what was contributed, addressed in Section 7.5 above but in what those contributions mean for communication scholarship in the Global South. These contributions position this study as a bridge between governance theory and communication science in a Global South context.

By testing Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory and Niemann's (2005) integrated communication model in a South African post-colonial public sector setting, this study demonstrates both the generative power and the contextual limitations of these frameworks. The finding that stakeholder identification must include communication needs analysis not just power or legitimacy mapping represents a meaningful extension of existing theory. Similarly, the finding that ethical partnerships cannot be sustained without institutionalised feedback mechanisms expands normative stakeholder theory (Patzner, Voegtlin and Scherer 2018) beyond its original corporate application.

7.8.2 Practical significance

The findings presented in this dissertation could provide organisations with new insights into how to improve their stakeholder communication. This pertains to the finding regarding empirically grounded ways to improve stakeholder identification and analysis, and thereby more practically grounded mechanisms to achieve vertical and horizontal communication integration and quality stakeholder engagement.

This study provided an integrated communication framework that is not only applicable to the DWS's realities but also clearly articulates pathways to improvement in terms of communication. In the more general case of water governance, this study could contribute to better practice by way of communication between water management

institutions and their stakeholders. Practically, the framework equips DWS with tools for stakeholder mapping and ethical engagement aligned with King IV/V governance principles.

7.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided a summary of the study. The contributions of the study to the field of study were highlighted. The strengths and limitations of the study were discussed, and recommendations were made for future research in the field. The chapter was concluded with the theoretical and practical contributions of the study.

This study provides a novel, empirically grounded integrated communication framework for DWS that addresses organisational challenges. It offers practical guidance for improving communication efforts with key stakeholders of the DWS, as well as a proposed implementation plan which would ultimately benefit the department and South Africa's water governance. Effective stakeholder communication remains essential water governance, and this framework provides a tested path forward.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICS APPROVAL



College of Human Sciences_CREC

Date: 15/11/2024

Dear: Mrs Amanda Reddy

Decision: Ethics Approval from 15 November 2024 to 14 November 2025

NHREC Registration # : (Rec-240816-052)
Ref #: 2190
Name: Mrs Amanda Reddy
Student #: 32296509

Researcher: Mrs Amanda Reddy

495 Lukas Street, Lukasrand

Pretoria

32296509@mylife.unisa.ac.za 0828842044

Supervisor: Mr Gibson Chauke chaukg1@unisa.ac.za

Co-Supervisor: Ms Ghazala Begum Essop essopgb@unisa.ac.za

A Theoretical Framework Towards an Integrated Communication Strategy for Stakeholder Management: A Study of the Department of Water and Sanitation and its Stakeholders.

Qualification: DFCOM95 MA Communication

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Human Sciences_CREC for the above-mentioned research study. Ethics approval is granted for one year.

The **low-risk application** was **reviewed** by the College of Human Sciences_CREC on **15 November 2024** in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the College of Human Sciences_CREC.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.

5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (**14 November 2025**). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal, for Ethics Research Committee approval.

Additional Conditions

1. Disclosure of data to third parties is prohibited without explicit consent from Unisa.
2. De-identified data must be safely stored on password protected PCs.
3. Care should be taken by the researcher when publishing the results to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the university.
4. Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication practices, principle 7 referring to Social awareness, must be ensured: "Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible." Unisa will not be liable for any failure to comply with this principle.

Note

The reference number 2190 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Prof Khatija Khan
Chair of College of Human Sciences_CRECE
E-mail: khankb@unisa.ac.za



Professor Omwoyo Bosire Onyancha
Executive Dean / By delegation from the Executive Dean of College of Human Sciences_CRECE
E-mail: onyanob@unisa.ac.za

APPENDIX B: RESEARCHER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT FORM

RESEARCHER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Research title: A Theoretical Framework Towards an Integrated Communication Strategy for Stakeholder Management. A Study of The Department of Water and Sanitation and its Stakeholders.

Researcher:
(Amanda Reddy)

Hereby, I Amanda Reddy, ID number 710923 0079081 in my personal capacity as a researcher, acknowledge that I am aware of and familiar with the stipulations and contents of the

- Unisa Research Policy
- Unisa Ethics Policy
- Unisa IP Policy

and that I shall conform to and abide by these policy requirements

Signature: 

Date: 4 June 2024

APPENDIX C: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT THE STUDY

PERMISSION LETTER

Research title: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT. A STUDY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF WATER AND SANITATION AND ITS STAKEHOLDERS.

Researcher:

(Amanda Reddy)

Request for permission to conduct research at Department of Water and Sanitation

A Theoretical Framework Towards an Integrated Communication Strategy for Stakeholder Management. A Study of The Department of Water and Sanitation and its Stakeholders.

1 November 2023'

Ms Verena Meyer
Continental Building, Room 201
Department of Water and Sanitation
Tel:012 336 7448 Cell: 083 229 2430 Email: meyerv@dws.gov.za

Dear Ms Meyer

I, Amanda Reddy am doing research with Mr G Chauke and Mrs G.B Essop, lecturers in the Department of Communication Science towards a Master of Arts degree at the University of South Africa. We have funding from UNISA for to conduct the research component. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled A Theoretical Framework Towards an Integrated Communication Strategy for Stakeholder Management. A Study of The Department of Water and Sanitation and Its Stakeholders.

The aim of the study is to develop a framework towards an integrated communication strategy for the Department of Water and Sanitation and its stakeholders.

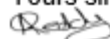
Your organisation has been selected because the study is focused on supporting your objectives and seeks to improve communication between your organisation and its stakeholders. The study will entail online semi structured interviews with stakeholders of the organisation and online focus groups with 12 managers of the Department of Water and Sanitation.

The potential benefits of this study can contribute to successful development of a framework for integrated communication between the Department of Water and Sanitation and its stakeholders.

As the focus group and interviews are conducted online, there are minimal risks. The study will be conducted in accordance with the ethics policy of UNISA.

Feedback procedure will entail sharing the approved study you and your organisation.

Yours sincerely



Amanda Reddy

<Researcher>

APPENDIX D: REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Research title: A Theoretical Framework Towards an Integrated Communication Strategy for Stakeholder Management. A Study of The Department of Water and Sanitation and its Stakeholders.

Researcher:
(Amanda Reddy)

Ethics clearance reference number:

Research permission reference number (if applicable):

1 June 2024

Title: A Theoretical Framework Towards an Integrated Communication Strategy for Stakeholder Management. A Study of The Department of Water and Sanitation and its Stakeholders.

Dear Prospective Participant

My name is Amanda Reddy, and I am doing research with Mr G Chauke and Ms G.B | Essop, who are lecturers in the Department of Communication Science towards a Master of Arts degree in Communication Science at the University of South Africa. We have funding from UNISA for research. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled *A Theoretical Framework Towards an Integrated Communication Strategy for Stakeholder Management. A Study of the Department of Water and Sanitation and its Stakeholders.*

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

This study is expected to collect important information that could inform the development of a theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy for the Department of Water and Sanitation and its stakeholders.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You were selected as a participant for the study as you are a subject matter expert with over 5 years of experience in the water sector and a stakeholder for the Department of Water and Sanitation.

I obtained your contact details after requesting a stakeholder database from the Department of Water and Sanitation. You were selected as a participant for the study due to your expertise and knowledge working with the Department of Water and Sanitation. The study will include online semi structured interviews with 10 external stakeholders of the Department of Water and Sanitation. Additionally, online focus groups will be held with 12 middle managers of the Department of Water and Sanitation.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

Your role as a participant is to respond to questions which will inform the study and the development of a framework for integrated communication strategy between the Department of Water and Sanitation and its stakeholders.

The study involves audio recording the online semi structured interviews and online focus groups. The questions are based on your experience communicating with the Department of Water and Sanitation or on the organisation's behalf.

The approximate time for the online semi structured interviews will be 45 minutes and 1 hour for the online focus group discussion.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is voluntary and that there is no penalty or loss of benefit for non-participation. Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

As the research seeks to develop a theoretical framework for an integrated communications strategy between the Department of Water and Sanitation and its

stakeholders, it has the potential to streamline communication and expedite service delivery. It can therefore enhance the communication between the organisation and its stakeholders to ensure the partnership is strengthened.

ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

As both the interviews and focus groups will be conducted online, there is minimal risk or inconvenience. It would require a computer and data for access.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

You have the right to insist that your name will not be recorded anywhere and that no one, apart from the researcher and identified members of the research team, will know about your involvement in this research. Your responses will be anonymised by assigning a code number or a pseudonym for data publications and research reporting such as conference proceedings.

Your answers may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including the transcriber, external coder, and members of the Research Ethics Review Committee. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records.

A report may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will remain anonymous. Please keep in mind that it is sometimes impossible to make an absolute guarantee of confidentiality or anonymity.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

Please note that your responses will be stored in both physical and electronic form. Hard copies will be kept in a locked cupboard or filing cabinet in Pretoria for a minimum of five years, while electronic copies will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics review and approval if applicable. Once the period of storage is complete, physical copies will be shredded and electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the computer's hard drive using relevant software.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There will be no form of payment or financial incentive for participating in the study.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Human Science, Unisa. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher if you so wish.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Amanda Reddy on Email: 32296509@mylife.unisa.ac.za. The findings are accessible for 1 year.

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Mr Chauke on Tel:(012) 429 6843 or Email: chaukg1@munisa.ac.za. Contact the research ethics chairperson, Mr Siyabonga M Mfuphi, Chairperson: Scientific Review Committee, Department of Communication Science on Email 41374649@mylife.unisa.ac.za if you have any ethical concerns.

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.



Amanda Reddy

APPENDIX E: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

Research title: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT. A STUDY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF WATER AND SANITATION AND ITS STAKEHOLDERS.

Researcher:
(Amanda Reddy)

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the online interview/online focus group.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname..... (please print)

Participant Signature.....Date.....

Researcher's Name & Surname.....Amanda Reddy (please print)

Researcher's signature..........Date 4 June 2024

APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Information about the study and focus group participation

Title of study: A theoretical framework towards an integrated communication strategy for stakeholder management: A study of the Department of Water and Sanitation and its stakeholders

Ethical Clearance Ref. #:

My name is Amanda Reddy and I am a Master's student, completing my dissertation in the Department of Communication at the University of South Africa. I am conducting a research study which will develop a theoretical framework of an integrated communication strategy for stakeholder management, that will benefit both the Department of Water and Sanitation and its stakeholders. I appreciate that you are willing to consider participating in my study. Due to your experience and insight in the field, I feel that your contribution will be really valuable.

With your permission the focus group interview will be recorded so that I may transcribe your responses. However, on the recording neither your names nor your positions will be used to identify you and hence your identity remains anonymous and your answers confidential. Only my academic supervisors and I will have access to the recordings and the transcribed data.

You have the right to withdraw at any stage, and your participation is entirely voluntary. You will also not suffer any negative effects, risks or consequences due to your participation. This session should last about 45 minutes.

Please feel free to contact me at 32298509@mylife.unisa.ac.za if you need more information.

Thank you for your participation. It is truly appreciated.

APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Introduction and ground rules

Good day, welcome and thank you for joining me today. My name is Amanda Reddy. I will be your facilitator.

The purpose of this focus group is to get your comments and inputs about the communication strategy of the Department of Water and Sanitation. Specifically, I would like to know what is currently working well and what challenges are present. This would help me to develop a theoretical framework, towards an integrated communication strategy for stakeholder management that would benefit the Department of Water and Sanitation.

Today we are conducting a focus group, which is a conversation that focuses on specific questions. I will be asking you questions and feel free to respond. You're also welcome to respond to each other's comments as you would in an ordinary conversation. You have all read the information sheet and responded that you are willing to participate.

Please note that this conversation will be audio recorded. No mention of names or job titles will be made. Therefore, this is a safe and confidential environment where I hope you will voice your honest opinions. I will be transcribing the audio recordings and the data will be used in my dissertation to develop the framework. You are under no obligation to answer questions that makes you feel uncomfortable.

The questions are divided into four sections.

- Firstly, we will look at the Department of Water and Sanitation's communication strategy with external stakeholders.
- Secondly, we will discuss the feedback and satisfaction level of the external stakeholders.
- Thirdly, we will look at the challenges that is currently experienced with the communication strategy.
- Lastly, the proposed integrated communication framework.

1. Department of Water and Sanitation's communication strategy with external stakeholders

Can you tell me what is the Department of Water and Sanitation's current communication strategy with external stakeholders?

Can you explain how you would categorise the external stakeholders of the Department of Water and Sanitation?

When the Department of Water and Sanitation plans external communication campaigns which communication tools does the organisation use to communicate with external stakeholders?

In your experience, how does the Department ensure that the different messages to its stakeholders are clear and consistent?

(Transition: Now for the second section, let's look at the feedback and satisfaction expressed by the external stakeholders. To start with can we focus on what the departments current communication strategy entails)

2. Feedback and satisfaction level of the external stakeholders.

To your knowledge, describe the avenues are available to external stakeholders with regards to providing feedback about communication issues they experience with the Department?

Can you describe what the external stakeholders' expectations are with regard to communication from the Department?

In your own opinion, how do you perceive external stakeholders' satisfaction with the Department of Water and Sanitation's communication strategy.

In your view, what measures does the Department have in place to ensure that external stakeholders are continuously satisfied with your communication strategy.

(Transition: For the last section, I would like to discuss the challenges that arise from the communication with external stakeholders.)

3. Challenges that is currently experienced with the communication strategy.

How would you describe the communication challenges your department experience with external stakeholders?

Would you say that the communication challenges with external stakeholders, is across all sectors or is it only in specific sectors?

What are the measures being implemented to solve communication challenges with external stakeholders?

4. The proposed integrated communication framework

Can you give me an overview of how the Department of Water and Sanitation fosters ethical partnerships?

In your opinion to what extent is the Department of Water and Sanitation geared towards stakeholder engagement?

Can someone explain how vertical and horizontal integration of communication takes place in the Department of Water and Sanitation?

How do the various Directorates work together to achieve the communication objectives of the organisation?

In your experience, how does the Department of Water and Sanitation ensure that the different messages to its stakeholder groups are integrated?

(Transition: Studies have shown that aspects such as strategic consistency, purposive interactivity, mission marketing, zero based planning, data driven marketing, integrated agency, core competencies, mutual beneficial relationships and stakeholder focus is important for an integrated communication framework.)

In your view, which of these aspects are current being integrated?

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for your valuable input and your willingness to participate and help me understand the communication strategy and issues better. I really appreciate your time. My next step is now to transcribe and analyse the responses. This information will contribute to my understanding of the existing status quo and assist me to develop a framework for an integrated communication strategy that will hopefully benefit both the Department of Water and Sanitation, as well as its external stakeholders. If you have any questions, you are welcome to contact me on my email address. Thank you again and I hope you have a great day!

APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction and ground rules

Good day, welcome and thank you for joining me today. My name is Amanda Reddy, I will be your interviewer.

The purpose of this interview is to get your thoughts and inputs as a stakeholder involved with the Department of Water and Sanitation. This study is about the department's communication approach and strategy. Specifically, I would like to understand your experience as a stakeholder regarding communication interactions with the Department of Water and Sanitation. This would help me to develop a theoretical framework, towards an integrated communication strategy for stakeholder management that would benefit the Department of Water and Sanitation as well as stakeholders, involved with the Department.

Our interview will focus on specific questions. Please feel free to respond and elaborate on your answers. You have read the information sheet and responded that you are willing to participate. Please note that this conversation will be audio recorded. No mention of your name or job title will be made. Therefore, this is a safe and confidential environment where I hope you will voice your honest opinions. I will be transcribing the audio recordings and the data will be used in my dissertation.

You are under no obligation to answer questions that makes you feel uncomfortable. You also have the right to withdraw at any stage.

(Transition: I would like to start our interview with some background information.)

Which sector are currently employed in?

How many years of experience do you have working in Water and Sanitation sector.

Which province you reside in?

(Transition: The questions are divided into four sections.)

Firstly, we will focus on the Department of Water and Sanitation's communication with your organisation as an external stakeholder. Secondly, I will ask you questions with regards to feedback and satisfaction level of your organisation. Thirdly, I will ask questions on the challenges that your organisation currently experiences with the communication from the Department of Water and Sanitation. Lastly, I would like to ask you some questions that aligns with the proposed integrated communication framework.

1. Department of Water and Sanitation's communication strategy with external stakeholders

In your opinion, how is the communication from the Department of Water and Sanitation tailored to your communication needs.

Can you describe the communication tools your organisation uses to access information from the Department of Water and Sanitation?

How do you feel about the effectiveness of the communication channels that are being used by the Department to inform stakeholders about key programmes or projects?

In your opinion how are the methods for integrating online and offline communication within the department conducted in terms of efficiency?

How can the Department improve its communication on key programmes, projects, policies and legislation?

In your experience, can your organisation access communication and information from all managerial levels in the Department of Water and Sanitation on key programmes such as water conservation, stakeholder consultations on policies reviews, as well as communication campaigns such as Water Week, Clear Rivers, Sanitation Week, among others?

(Transition: Now, for the second section, let's look at the feedback your organisation has with regards to the Department's current communication approach.)

2. Feedback and satisfaction level of the external stakeholders.

In your opinion how does the Department encourage open and honest feedback on communication issues?

From your experience does the Department give serious consideration to any sector feedback received on communication issues?

Do you think that changes are made in accordance with feedback given by stakeholders of the Department?

How do you perceive your organisations satisfaction with the Department of Water and Sanitation's communication efforts?

How is the Department of Water and Sanitation providing information which leads to strategic decision making on water and sanitation related issues?

(Transition: For the section, regarding communication challenges your organisation experience, I would like to discuss the challenges that arise from the Department's communication approach.)

3. Challenges that is currently experienced with the communication strategy.

Please elaborate on the communication challenges your organisation is experiencing with the Department of Water and Sanitation?

To your knowledge, what communication challenges affect collaboration on projects, between your organisation and the Department of Water and Sanitation?

What measures are you aware of that the Department of Water and Sanitation employs to solve communication issues on campaigns, policies and regulation?

(Transition: In the last section, I would like to ask you questions that relate to the proposed communication integrated framework.)

4. The proposed integrated communication framework

How does the current communication strategy strengthen relationships and partnerships between the Department and your organisation, as the stakeholder?

In your experience, how does the Department of Water and Sanitation foster ethical partnerships?

In your opinion, to what extent is the Department of Water and Sanitation geared towards stakeholder engagement?

How do the various Directorates work together to achieve the communication objectives of the organisation?

In your experience, how does the Department of Water and Sanitation ensure that the different messages to its stakeholder groups are integrated?

Explain the role your organisation plays in building a relationship with the Department of Water and Sanitation

(Transition: Studies have shown that aspects such as strategic consistency, purposive interactivity, mission marketing, zero based planning, data driven marketing, integrated agency, core competencies, mutual beneficial relationships and stakeholder focus is important for an integrated communication framework.)

In your view, which of these aspects are current being integrated?

Conclusion

Thank you so much for your valuable input and your willingness to participate and help me understand the communication strategy and issues better. I really appreciate your time. My next step is now to transcribe and analyse the responses. This information will contribute to my understanding of the existing status quo and assist me to develop a framework for an integrated communication strategy that will hopefully benefit both the Department of Water and Sanitation, as well as its external stakeholders. If you have any questions, you are welcome to contact me on my email address.

APPENDIX I: RESEARCH TOOLS DECLARATION

In completing this dissertation, I have used the following software tools and technological support to support different stages of the research process.

Research and analysis software:

MAXQDA was utilised for qualitative data analysis and coding across multiple components of the study.

Writing and documentation tools:

Microsoft Word served as the primary platform for document preparation and thesis writing.

OneDrive was used for secure document backup and version control.

Edraw was used to develop visual frameworks, diagrams and conceptual models.

Grammarly was used for grammar checking, language refinement and proofreading of the thesis text.

While these tools supported aspects of research organisation, analysis and writing, all research design decisions, theoretical framing, critical interpretation and academic conclusions are solely my own. The intellectual contribution, analysis and arguments presented in this dissertation represent my independent scholarly work conducted during my period of study at the University of South Africa.

Full name: Amanda Reddy

Student



Signature

15 December 2025

Date