

Information sharing on social media pages related to wildlife conservation in a South African national game reserve

Isabel Stella Schellnack-Kelly
*Department of Information Science, University of South Africa,
Pretoria, South Africa*

Abstract

Purpose – Social media sites contribute significantly to nature conservation in, that they enlighten and educate those members of the public who would ordinarily not be in a position, or would not be fortunate enough to visit the park and experience the various aspects first-hand. The purpose of this paper is to showcase social media pages related to a national game reserve in South Africa. This game reserve is the largest in the country and has a wide variety of conserved fauna and flora.

Design/methodology/approach – The theoretical framework used is the SCOPE framework that streamlines strategy development, content choice, refinement of online engagement, choice of social media platform and evaluations of social media campaigns.

Findings – The findings relate to the content found on these social media pages, as well as how members of the public interact with each other and officials from the game reserve in sharing experiences related to this wilderness area.

Research limitations/implications – The research is related to the Kruger National Park in South Africa and is limited to three social media sites.

Originality/value – Through its social media presence, this South African game reserve is able to share experiences from what is effectively a living museum, as well as from its library and archives, with members of the public and allowing individual members to share their encounters with wildlife and their historical memories of this wilderness area.

Keywords Social media, Information seeking, Information sharing, Conservation, SCOPE framework, Cultural heritage

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Social media has revolutionised the way research and information sharing opportunities can be communicated with the general public. This is a view expressed by [Bryan *et al.* \(2017\)](#) relating to social media associated with museum collections and organisations that are, in turn, associated with entomological collections displayed and discussed on social media pages. Social media pages provide fertile ground for organisations and knowledgeable individuals, giving them opportunities to disseminate knowledge and information in real



time (Bryan *et al.*, 2017, p. 466). Currently, few studies exist on the use of social media by organisations that engage with the general public on matters of social importance. Social media has the power to promote organisations, and such information sharing allows new audiences to be attracted to engaging with individuals that share similar interests. South Africa's national game reserve, Kruger Park, has several pages on Facebook, which provide opportunities for information sharing relating to all aspects of the management and care of the fauna and flora in this wilderness area. The purpose of this article is to analyse three of the Kruger National Park Facebook pages and to engage with the users on these pages as to the value that they attach to the information obtained from these social media pages.

The world-renowned Kruger Park offers a wildlife experience that ranks with the best in Africa. This flagship of the South African national parks is home to an impressive number of species: 336 trees, 49 fish, 34 amphibians, 114 reptiles, 507 birds and 147 mammals, as well as 2 million ha of flora and fauna and historical and archaeological sites. The Kruger Park is characterised by combinations of savannah, thornveld and woodland ecozones. The game reserve has 12 main rest camps, five bushveld camps, two bush lodges and four satellite camps. The far north of the park is the wildest and most difficult area to access but is alluring to real adventurers. Mozambique's Limpopo National park, Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou and South Africa's Kruger Park together form the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, which covers an area of 100,000 km² (Facebook, SAN Parks – [South African National Parks](#), 2021).

2. Research objectives

Social media pages, in many instances, have become arbiters that chart the extent of human knowledge, achievement and expression in every field of human endeavour, including arts, craft, science, rural life, childhood and antiquities (Popple *et al.*, 2020, pp. 109-110). The research objectives aim to analyse the social media pages of a national game reserve in South Africa and to establish how these pages are used to educate audiences, share information on wildlife and conservation and the history of the game reserve, encourage new visitors to visit this game reserve and provide opportunities for staff to participate, engage and provide information on different fauna and flora and on the history of the game reserve.

The purpose of this investigation is to examine the extent of adoption and use of social media by the South African National Parks Board, specifically in relation to the Kruger Park. The study also seeks to examine the sites available on Facebook. The study wanted to unpack the benefits associated with the application of social media to the promotion of conservation and tourism in South Africa by using social media platforms. The study aims to assess whether there are policies and guidelines relating to social media and its intensity with regard to the Kruger Park.

3. Literature review

3.1 Information-seeking behaviour concerning social media sources

According to da Mota and Pickering (2020), social media users share experiential and practical knowledge in the context of everyday life. Informational support provided by social media users is complemented by socio-emotional support. Predominant types of information behaviour include requests for information, answering with information, unsolicited information sharing and information integration. Browsing and monitoring are important types of information-seeking behaviour on social media. Users use a combination of information behaviours, information sources, online and offline sources for information needs that are important to them (Khoo, 2014, pp. 75-78). Social media refers to the user-

generated content resulting from online social interaction. Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2004) refer to consumer-related media that describes a variety of sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities and issues. The user-generated content reflects information behaviour and contains information that users search for, browse and consume (da Mota and Pickering, 2020). Khoo (2014) has identified two types of social media applications. These are where there is a substantial amount of user interaction that is captured as user-contributed content on social networking sites and online discussion forums.

Khoo (2014), Kim (2014) and da Mota and Pickering (2020) concur that social media sites tend to favour several types of information behaviour. These are everyday life information behaviour; non-work and non-school information needs; browsing, monitoring and asking; opportunistic information acquisition; information publishing and information seeking; intermediary roles undertaken by users, including information seeking by proxy; information summarising and information forwarding; social information behaviour and development of information communities; information use and evaluation; and the propagation of information in online social networks.

Khoo (2014) further contends that social media affords researchers the opportunity to study three kinds of information behaviour. The first of these is critical information behaviour, which evaluates behaviour and biases. The second is information integration, which includes information summarisation and knowledge synthesis. The third kind of behaviour is the use of information in changing opinion, sentiment and decision-making (Khoo, 2014, p. 86). These three types of behaviour are intertwined and are indeed relevant to the social media sites associated with the Kruger Park. A user's evaluative comments on another user's post can trigger discussion and stimulate other users to contribute related information. Subsequent posts may attempt to make sense of the available information and synthesise the best possible answer (O'Connor, 2013).

The types of information associated with social media sites are advice, recommendations, opinions and experiential and practice knowledge related to everyday life issues, all of which may be customised for particular users and contexts, including geographical location and time [Da Mota and Pickering (2020)]. Everyday life issues encompass a broad range of topics, including leisure and entertainment, being social events, hobbies, sports, music and travel. Khoo (2014) emphasises the need to study specific everyday life issues and how their saliency varies according to people's life stages, situations and communities. Social media is associated with types of information that have traditionally not been well-studied: asking, answering, information sharing, critical information behaviour and the passive behaviours of browsing and information encountering (Khoo, 2014).

3.2 Adoption and use of social media by archives, museums and libraries

Social media is broadly defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Examples of specific platforms include blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube and Pinterest. According to Hampton *et al.* (2012) in Heyliger *et al.* (2013), Facebook users receive valuable information from libraries, museums and archives and advocate that the presence of social media provides such institutions with cost-effective ways to reach new audiences.

For the purposes of this article, the focus has been on Facebook pages relating to the Kruger Park. Social media pages are being used by museums, libraries and archives to

generate interest amongst the general public and to showcase collections as part of outreach programmes. The Kruger Park Facebook pages showcase the national game reserve as a living museum, library and archives by allowing staff members and members of the public to share their sightings and experiences while in the Kruger Park. The Facebook pages also enable people unfamiliar with the game reserve to ask questions and obtain more information that may encourage them to visit. The Kruger Park library and archives at Skukuza have a wealth of information on the past and present relating to the game reserve, which would interest many people who are interested in this game reserve. Social media have been widely used in libraries and museums to disseminate a variety of information to the wider public (Rogers, 2009). Nonetheless, the use of social media is a relatively rare phenomenon in the South African archival services. Many researchers believe that social media can be used to promote the public image and the communication strategy of the archival services. Garaba (2012) mentions that public programming can be enhanced through the use of social media technologies. According to Lina Bountouria and Georgios Giannakopoulou (2014) and Manca (2021), the majority of the archival services use Facebook, YouTube and blogs. As far as the updating of the social media accounts is concerned, these authors concluded that the services update their accounts according to the nature and type of each social media. For example, accounts on Facebook and Twitter seem to be frequently updated with new material, which makes sense as users visit these platforms on a regular basis (Manca, 2021). Updating frequency shows the importance each of the archival, library and museum services gives to its social media presence (Bountouria and Giannakopoulou, 2014). The use of social media can promote the image of institutions to the public and improve their public relations. It is important to note that archival services, libraries and museums have realised the benefits of social networking and that they try to follow the trends of society. Bountouria and Giannakopoulou (2014) focussed specifically on the archival services in Greece; however, despite some remarkable efforts, the lack of financial and human resources the services provided by the benefits of social media platforms cannot effectively be exploited.

4. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework adopted for the purpose of this article is the SCOPE framework, which has been used by the Australian National Insect Collection and National Museums in Scotland to develop and maintain social media presence and active engagement with students and interested members of the public (Bryan *et al.*, 2017, p. 469). The SCOPE framework streamlines strategy development, content choice, refinement of online engagement, choice of social media platform and evaluations of social media campaigns (Bryan *et al.*, 2017, p. 469). SCOPE is an acronym for strategy development, content choice, online engagement filters, platform choice and evaluation (Bryan *et al.*, 2017, p. 470). Figure 1 illustrates:

5. Research questions

The questions that guide this study are: how many members are on the various sites related to the Kruger Park? How many social media pages relate specifically to the Kruger Park? Have these social media sites encouraged persons to visit the Kruger Park? What is the educational value of these social media pages? How are staff encouraged to engage and share their experiences and knowledge of fauna and flora with participants on the social media sites?

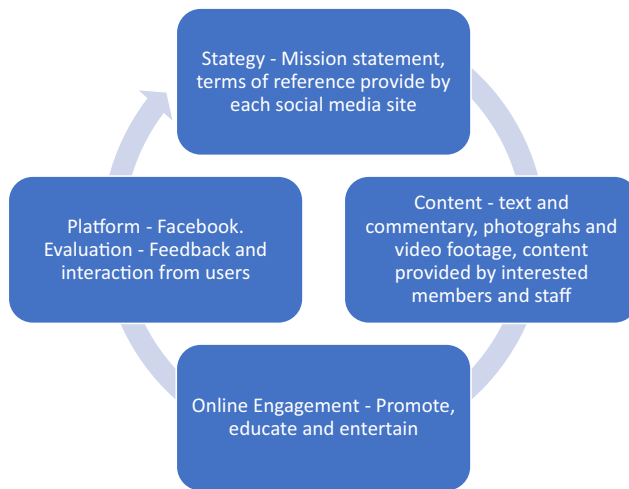


Figure 1.
SCOPE framework

6. Research methodology

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies was used to conduct the research and discuss the findings relating to the use of social media pages related to the Kruger Park to engage in information sharing about fauna and flora found in this wilderness area. For the purposes of this article, the research involved collecting, analysing and interpreting both qualitative and quantitative data, as well as integrating conclusions from such data (Leedy and Ormrod, 2014, p. 268). A case study research design method has been used to focus specifically on the Facebook pages relating to Kruger Park interests. The qualitative data provided insights into cause-and-effect relationships, which could then be tested through controlled quantitative research (Leedy and Ormrod, 2014, p. 269). A phenomenological approach was applied to this research on social media accounts relating to a national game reserve in South Africa. According to Maluleka (2020, pp. 236-237), phenomenology is an effective method among information professionals and for use in the study of reference and information services. It is thus regarded as an appropriate approach to analyse the information-seeking trends of people engaging on the social media platforms relating to wilderness areas in South Africa and focusing specifically on the country's largest protected wilderness area, being the Kruger Park. A questionnaire was emailed to members that regularly post information on these Facebook pages. Purposive sampling was used by approaching members who regularly participate on these pages, including staff from the Kruger Park. The sample included both men and women, as well as staff members working for the Kruger Park. Thirty persons were approached, of which only ten returned the questionnaire. The data from each questionnaire was analysed by the researcher.

7. Research findings

The Facebook pages that were the main focus of this research were SANParks Kruger National Park; KNP – Best Place on Earth; and Kruger National Park History. The research was conducted from the beginning of November 2021 to the end of March 2022. The following data was captured relating to these three groups found on Facebook:

(1) SANParks Kruger National Park

This Facebook page has 196,989 members and was created in January 2008. On average, this page has 1,897 posts in a month. This group is administered by 13 persons, all in the employment of the South African National Parks Board. This group has several rules that need to be adhered to. These are: not to post the location of rhino, elephant or pangolin sightings; not to launch personal attacks on other members; not to post photographs taken outside the Greater Kruger National Park; and not to submit any non-Kruger-related posts. Posts should be members' own photographs. It is also noted that all malaria-related queries should be directed to a medical practitioner. Speeding vehicles and bad behaviour in the park should be reported to SANParks contacts. Members share their photographs in good faith and are encouraged not to steal images or share them without the permission of the photographer.

(2) KNP – Best Place on Earth

This Facebook page has 77,821 members and was created on 5 April 2008. On average, this page has 1,780 posts per month. It is administered by four administrators and is monitored by members of the South African National Parks Board. The same rules that applied to the SANParks Kruger National Park Facebook page also apply to this page.

(3) Kruger National Park History

This Facebook page has 23,149 members and was created on 29 March 2014. On average, this page has 39 posts per month. It is administered by three persons working for the South African National Parks Board and who have an interest in the history of the Kruger Park. The Kruger Park is a special place for South Africans, and there is a keen interest in the history of this national treasure. The purpose of this group is to share this interest with others and to share stories, images and graphics reflecting the history of the Kruger Park.

The following information is reflected in [Table 1](#).

7.1 Online engagement

While engaging with users of the social media sites, questions were posed to users to obtain their input on the importance of these social media sites in terms of information sharing and

Facebook pages	No. of members	No. of posts per month	No. of administrators
SANParks Kruger National Park	196,989	1,897 (November 2021) 2,217 (December 2021) 1,787 (January 2022) 1,790 (February 2022) 1,539 (March 2022)	13
KNP – Best Place on Earth	77,821	1, 780 (November 2021) 1,594 (December 2021) 1,732 (January 2022) 996 (February 2022) 1 629 (March 2022)	4
Kruger National Park History	23,149	39 (November 2021) 41 (December 2021) 23 (January 2022) 26 (February 2022) 34 (March 2022)	3

Table 1.
Three Facebook
groups related to the
Kruger Park

how the sites have influenced users' experiences while visiting the Kruger Park. The questions posed were:

- Q1. How many times have you visited the Kruger Park?
- Q2. How often do you visit the Kruger Park?
- Q3. How long have you been a member of the different Kruger Park social pages on Facebook?
- Q4. What do you regard as the purpose of the social media sites relating to the Kruger Park?
- Q5. How do the social media sites contribute to interest in nature conservation and the environment?
- Q6. What is the educational value of these social media sites?
- Q7. What are the benefits of staff and visitors to the game reserves sharing their knowledge, photographs and experiences with other members and interested individuals?

Thirty regular active members from the three sites were approached to complete a questionnaire on their experiences using the social media sites. There was equal representation of men and women, though the final responders were mostly men. The ages ranged from early 30s to pensioners. Only ten questionnaires were returned.

These were some of the views expressed:

What do you regard as the purpose of these social media sites?

"A place to share memories, photos, information and interesting facts about something that like-minded people enjoy. Even when you're not in the bush, when you visit these sites, it takes you back to the memories that everyone cherishes knowing how special these places are. Also, to scout for the best park accommodation and areas to see specific species".

"To enlighten the general public of the various wonderful aspects of the Kruger National Park, whether it be fauna, flora, or general information about the park, rest camps and/or picnic sites".

"Meeting people with the same interests as yourselves. Becoming one big 'family'. appreciating each other's knowledge and views about wildlife. The knowledge that you can convey to your children, grandchildren as well as friends. Our only Son (52), his wife and three grandchildren are all nature lovers. His first visit to the Park was at the age of two years. They now are more regular visitors than ourselves".

"I love sharing my Kruger experiences. I have a deep love and passion for the Kruger so sharing my experiences and seeing experiences of others is a highlight".

In your opinion, how do these social media sites contribute to interest in nature conservation?

"I think it's a way to reach a large audience which will be very difficult to reach in any other way. It informs people about things that they might have never considered. I do think it plays a very important role in educating and informing the public on Nature Conservation. We don't personally use these sites specifically for Nature Conservation".

"Social media sites contribute significantly to nature conservation in that they enlighten and educate those members of the public who would ordinarily not be in a position, or would not be fortunate enough to visit the park and experience the various aspects first hand".

“Sharing experiences with other conservationists by means of photos, CDs, videos and written information. Learning more about wildlife – animals, birds, reptiles, trees, plants etc. Learn to appreciate and not to kill”.

“They play a massive role in creating awareness about poaching. A lot of overseas people on the sites get to see our beautiful wildlife and it adds to the tourism industry. A lot of South Africans who have never visited the Kruger also want to visit after seeing the photos. Some of the revenue generated from these new visitors goes towards conservation”.

What is the educational value of these social media sites?

“Social Media these days have an amazing reach. People spend hours a day on these sites. Even though we might not necessarily use these sites for education, we often read something educational on these pages – From learning to speak to the staff in their language to learning about the different flora, all over the park.

It also provides a great forum to ask questions and discuss topics which otherwise might be very difficult to do”.

“The educational value plays a significant role. It must, however, be cautioned that many social media users express their opinion/s on these sites, which is not necessarily correct and therefore, the correct educational aspect/s could be distorted from time to time. It is therefore imperative that the administrator of the social media site regularly checks the information posted and then deletes content that is not deemed appropriate. Photographs and videos are also excellent tools to highlight the various educational aspects of the park”.

“You get more up to date information of present happenings in the wild. Like people, no two animals act/ behave the same. That is why a once-off visit is insufficient. During each follow-up visit, you learn more and more. Thus, members of Social Media Sites act as educators to us as wildlife enthusiasts”.

“I find these sites helpful as you can learn a lot about animal behaviour, some sites specify names of bird, trees and reptiles which I enjoy, it is interesting to learn about snakes, names and which ones are venomous, etc. I have also learnt a lot about photographing wildlife. It is amazing how many people are ignorant about how to behave around wildlife, a lot of these sites educate people about how to behave and respect wild animals”.

What are the benefits do staff and visitors to the game reserve contribute in sharing their knowledge, photographs and experiences with interested individuals?

“There might not be direct benefits to sharing knowledge and photos on these sites, other than perhaps feeling part of the community.

Perhaps if you are a photographer doing tours, sharing photos of your sightings etc. might add financial benefit to sharing on these sites – But for the average individual just sharing a picture of what they enjoy doing, the benefit might only be feeling part of the Kruger Community.

The benefits to staff can be to read about the experience visitors have and to improve in the areas where there might be complaints.

It can be a valuable tool from a business side to address concerns and improve the overall experience of your visitors”.

“The sharing of knowledge, photographs and experiences enlighten and educate those members of the public who would ordinarily not be in a position or would not be fortunate enough to visit

the park and experience the various aspects first-hand. Tool sharing leads to information sharing and used properly, this can be an excellent mechanism for educating both staff and visitors to the park”.

“Benefits to staff are that they become experts as well by answering the many questions put to them by visitors, especially foreigners. This might even mean a welcome “tip” in their pockets. Thus, sharing knowledge of their workplace will be to their own benefit. They feel important and appreciated”.

“I started a fun page in 2015 on FB. I get to share my photos, experiences and videos on the various sites. For me, it is about having fun. It brings me a lot of pleasure sharing my material. I have learnt a lot over the years, and I have a platform to educate people from all around the world, my page has grown dramatically since 2015 and I have a large following. With this comes responsibility. For me, it is about sharing my passion and love for the Kruger and I would like to think that I have touched a lot of hearts and souls. I am sure it different for other people. I see a lot of professional photographers selling their material and offering photographic courses etc. Some people just photograph the big cats, some just the birds. Personally, I enjoy everything the park has to offer but I respect that everyone does things differently. No one way is the correct way. As I said earlier there are a lot of experts in certain fields, which I love. I will never stop learning. Being an educator myself I am like a sponge, especially anything to do with Kruger, I listen and observe all the time”.

In your opinion, what are the drawbacks (negative aspects) of these social media sites?

“It often happens where comment sections are turned into a battlefield where people attack each other and ultimately just ruin the experience that people seek when visiting these sites”.

“These social media sites often, unfortunately, tend to attract negative comments and/or ‘trolling’ from individuals who are not happy with various aspects, relating to the park. The social media sites become a platform for general negativity by a few individuals and then others ‘jump onto the bandwagon’ enforcing the negative comments, which makes it unpleasant for everyone else trying to enjoy the positivity of that social media site”.

“Most of us who have visited the Park for many years realise that some facilities in Rest Camps, as well as picnic places, have gone off. Despite this, the social media sites are not the place to bring this up. People’s standards differ! We have in the past sent written reports, CDs and videos regarding problems direct to SANParks Management. Unfortunately, we got very little response from them. These Social Media Sites are neither there for arguments as each person has the right to his/her own opinion. These social media sites should also steer clear of racism and politics”.

“The biggest issue for me is a small percentage of people feel empowered sitting behind a keyboard, being overly critical and rude, I try and stay clear of this type of commentary and get involved mainly by posting positive experiences and my photos. It is hard to debate a topic on social media and get your point across. I also find that some people are in competition, that is not what Kruger is about. Kruger doesn’t belong to any of us, we should be enjoying each other’s experiences and photos”.

8. Discussion

Social media engagement and growth on their social media platforms continue to increase as a result of SANParks’ planned online initiatives to ensure greater reach. Audiences are engaged by means of content campaigns and themed topics. SANParks’ social media platforms enjoyed significant growth during 2020/2021. YouTube subscriptions grew from

3,000 to 10,000 (69.3% increase) and enough watch time for SANParks videos was generated to enable the YouTube channel to be monetised. Instagram grew from 80,000 to 125,000 followers (35.7% increase) and LinkedIn from 23,000 to 35,000 networks (32% increase) over the same period, while all other platforms also showed positive growth (South African National Parks, 2021, p. 88). The discussion for this article is focused specifically on the Facebook accounts managed by SANParks. The data collected from the questionnaires and observation of the three Facebook pages are in agreement with the views expressed by da Mota and Pickering (2020) and Khoo (2014) where users share knowledge, interact and share discussions relating to nature conservation.

Social media accounts used in this case study were those specifically managed by the National Parks Board by one or more staff acting as the moderator over the content as well as pages created by interested members of the public and members of staff to discuss and share information related to the Kruger Park. It is acknowledged by the administrators of these sites that the profile of the game reserve and the relevant persons managing these sites provide opportunities for information sharing and the generation of interest from persons unfamiliar with the management and conservation of natural heritage, in particular fauna and flora found in South African wilderness areas. Content is shared on these sites by the administrator, staff members and members of the public. The content includes discussion matters, photographs and video footage from both staff members and the general public. The number of social media reactions, including likes, shares, comments, impressions, reads and views, were recorded for each post and presented in Tables 1 of each social media page. Questions were posed to regular members of the sites, and responses were recorded for the period November 2021 to April 2022. The combined estimated total, as presented in the provided table, was calculated by totalling the number of impressions from each of the Facebook pages. The SCOPE framework has been applied to the discussion on these findings.

8.1 Strategy

The SANParks Kruger National Park Facebook Group was created on 31 January 2008. The purpose of this group is to inform interested members on the sightings and matters of importance relating to the Kruger Parks and its immediate surrounds. According to the Facebook page of this group:

“The world-renowned Kruger National Park offers a wildlife experience that ranks with the best in Africa.

Kruger National Park is characterised by combinations of savannah, thornveld and woodland eco-zones. Kruger has 12 main rest camps, five bushveld camps, two bush lodges and four satellite camps”.

This group has over 196,000 members and daily posts inform members of matters of importance related to the Kruger Park. This group is administered by 13 administrators, who are all employed by SANParks and specifically conduct tasks related to conservation and tourism in Kruger.

The second Facebook Group, being KNP – Best Place on Earth, was created on 31 July 2015. The group has over 104,000 members. It is one of the largest groups related to the Kruger Park. Members are allowed to post photographs, videos and narratives relating to Kruger. The Kruger Park was established in 1898. It has 12 main camps, five bushveld camps, two bush lodges and four satellite camps. Group members are encouraged to share their experiences from anywhere in Kruger. Members are also encouraged to share

knowledge and ask questions on sightings and matters related to Kruger. It is also possible for members to invite friends to share in their experiences relating to the park. The rules that members are requested to observe include:

- Members may NOT mention the location, road name or date of the photographs they have taken – especially with rhino, elephant and pangolin photos.
- Be kind and courteous – create a welcoming environment. Debates are allowed, but all members are required to be polite.
- Self-promotion, spam and irrelevant links are not allowed.
- Bullying of any kind is not allowed, and degrading comments about things like race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, gender or identity will not be tolerated.

The Kruger National Park History Facebook Group was created on 29 March 2014. The purpose of the group is to share the Kruger Park as a special place for South Africans and share it with those who have a keen interest in the history of the park. The group shares this interest with its members by soliciting stories, images and graphics relating to the history of Kruger. The administrator for this group is Joep Stevens, a member of staff of South African National Parks and specifically stationed in Kruger, at the Skukuza camp. This group has over 23,000 members.

8.2 Content

Under this element, the author has discussed the dominant themes that tend to prevail on the three Facebook pages. These have been identified by the dominant hashtags that have been identified on each page.

The first Facebook group, SANParks Kruger National Park, has identified the following dominant themes: #KnowYourPark, #elephants, #birding, #leopards, #mykrugerstory, #wilddog and #RhinoPoaching. This Facebook page is managed by the South African National Parks staff. The 13 administrators monitor the site and add information as they deem appropriate. The first hashtag, namely, #KnowYourPark, provides staff members with opportunities to identify and elaborate on different fauna and flora sightings and to explain extraordinary sightings to members. Many of the members are from overseas or are South Africans who have never visited the Kruger Park. These postings enable the staff of the Kruger Park and South African National Parks to educate and attract regular and potential visitors to the Kruger Park.

The #elephants hashtag allows visitors and staff to add postings related to sightings of elephants in Kruger. Under this hashtag, it is also possible to find information on elephants that have large tusks. However, out of concern for the safety of the elephants, the locations of these large tuskers are omitted to protect them from would-be poachers. The #birding hashtag refers to a regular activity and area of interest to visitors of the Kruger Park. Visitors have opportunities to share their experiences and enable members to correctly identify birds. Many visitors to the Kruger Park enjoy the thrill of spotting the large cats – lions, leopards and cheetahs. Of the cats, the leopard is generally the most exciting and elusive. It is for this reason that the hashtag #leopards is also a regular theme on the SANParks Kruger Park Facebook page.

Under the hashtag #mykrugerstory, visitors share their personal experiences in the Kruger. Many of these are people from abroad who have travelled to South Africa, especially to embark on a safari adventure in South Africa, specifically the Kruger Park. Photographs and narratives are shared with those who are interested. The hashtag #wilddog discusses sightings of this endangered species and where these animals can be located. The wild dog

tends to live in packs and frequent territories throughout the Kruger Park. These sightings tend to aid the game rangers in keeping tabs on where these packs are located in the park. The final hashtag identified here is that of #RhinoPoaching. The Kruger Park has both black and white rhinoceroses. The black rhinoceros is under serious threat in this region and is in danger of becoming extinct locally. Sightings of rhinos are regarded as special sightings and the locations where the animals are spotted may not be shared on the social media platforms. This, as is the case for the large tuskers, is done to protect these animals from would-be poachers. These sightings also provide the game rangers and other SANParks staff with an opportunity to share experiences concerned with protecting these animals (Figure 2).

Under the Facebook Group KNP – Best Place on Earth, the following seven hashtags were identified: #FridayTheme, #theme, #staysafe, #friday, #krugernationalpark, #RhinoFriday and #rhinoaday.

The first hashtag is the #FridayTheme. Each week the administrators decided on a theme relevant to the Kruger Park. Group members are then encouraged to add photographs, video recordings and narratives relating to that theme. This hashtag is very popular with the members and generates much interest. The second hashtag #theme also relates to this practice of identifying a theme for each week and requesting members to add photographs, video clips and narratives relevant to the theme. The #staysafe hashtag largely relates to the protection of rhinos in the Kruger Park. Regular members posting under this hashtag have included photographs of rhinos that they have seen but, without indicating the locations of these animals. The #Friday hashtag relates to the hashtags under #FridayTheme and #theme. The theme for each week is normally posted on a Friday and members then share photographs, video footage and narratives relating to sightings they have encountered that relate to that theme.

The hashtag #krugernationalpark group members have added photographs and narratives of extraordinary sightings, such as the white lions in the Satara–Orpen areas, black rhinos in undisclosed locations and sightings of elusive cats, such as leopards and cheetahs. The hashtag #RhinoFriday includes photographs, and narratives of black and white rhinos that have been found in Kruger. As mentioned, the locations of these animals

- # **KnowYourPark** 📌
Pinned by admin • 370 posts in this group

- # **elephants** 📌
Pinned by admin • 201 posts in this group

- # **birding** 📌
Pinned by admin • 194 posts in this group

- # **leopards** 📌
Pinned by admin • 174 posts in this group

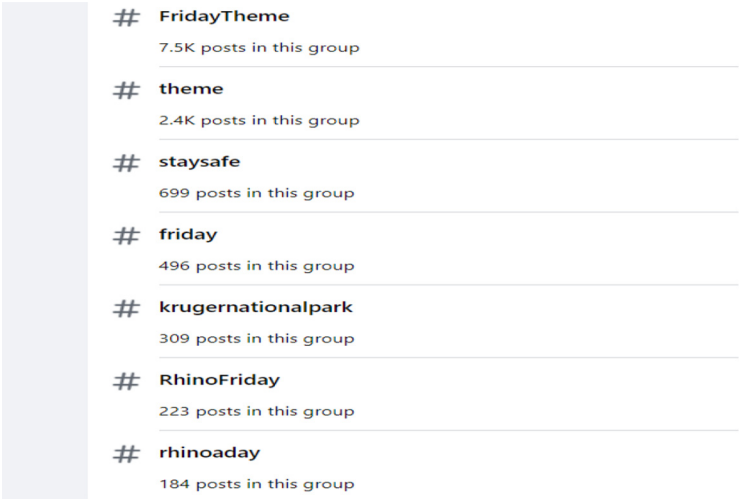
- # **mykrugerstory** 📌
Pinned by admin • 105 posts in this group

- # **wilddog** 📌
Pinned by admin • 102 posts in this group

- # **RhinoPoaching** 📌
Pinned by admin • 69 posts in this group

Figure 2.
Hashtags from
SANParks Kruger
National Parks
(Facebook page, 2022)

Figure 3.
KNP – Best Place on
Earth (Facebook
page, 2022)



are not disclosed, to protect their locations from would-be poachers. The last hashtag that is identified is #rhinoday, which also contains photographs and narratives relating to black and white rhinos seen in the Kruger Park. Many of these hashtags are dominated by regular contributors and several of these members were approached to complete a questionnaire on the use of social media to promote the Kruger Park and stimulate the conservation of all fauna and flora found in this game reserve (Figure 3).

Under the Kruger National Park History Facebook group, no record is available of the regular features on these pages. This Facebook group has a relatively small group of members. The material on this site is largely added by staff from SANParks. It includes photographs, video footage and narratives from staff members recalling events that they encountered when working in the Kruger Park. This group could be stimulated by utilising material available at the SANParks archives in Skukuza to attract more interest and share past experiences with members of the public interested in the historical development of the Kruger Park. As already noted, the administrator frequently adds narratives and photographs of floods that occurred in Kruger in February 2000 that devastated the infrastructure in the southern part of the Kruger Park. Very heavy rainfall in the catchment of the major rivers caused record water levels. This caused havoc in the Park resulting in several camps being closed for several weeks or months.

Another narrative shared by Joep Stevens is that of a horrific train accident that occurred within the borders of the Kruger Park. This is the narrative that was shared:

“At 13h12 on 1 January 1968, the worst train accident in the history of the Park occurred near the Randspruit siding between Skukuza and Crocodile Bridge. A goods train, heavily laden with phosphate ore and drawn by two diesel locomotives, crashed into the back of a stationary mixed train comprising of five goods wagons and four passenger saloons. The collision caused the four passenger saloons to derail and roll down a three metre embankment. The driver and 12 passengers lost their lives and several others were injured. The subsequent enquiry found that several of the safety measures had not been followed and indications were that one of the trains was speeding and that speed at impact was estimated to have been between 65 and 70 km/h (with a speed limit of 48km/h applicable on that stretch)”.

This Facebook group posts regular narratives and photographs of the development of the different camps in Kruger, as well as tributes to rangers that have retired or have passed away. Members of the public are interested in the history of the Kruger Park and have an interest in how the park has developed over the years. This Facebook group could also benefit from sharing experiences of African rangers and staff whose narratives have not always been captured. There is also a need to share indigenous knowledge related to Kruger. Information on historical sites, such as the Masorini Ruins, near the Phalaborwa Gate, and the Maluleka Community, in the northern Kruger Park, near the Punda Maria camp, should also be shared with interested members.

8.3 Platform and evaluation

The reason for selecting the Facebook groups was due to the following factors: According to [Kaplan and Haenlein \(2010, p. 61\)](#), Facebook groups can assist with teaching and learning as they enable organisations and interested persons to include information and lead to discussions on matters of importance. In South Africa, there are many communities that have never visited the Kruger Park and are unfamiliar with the different fauna and flora. These Facebook groups enable interested members to ask questions and allow more experienced persons to correctly identify the fauna and flora under discussion. In addition, these Facebook groups provide information to persons from other countries who may be interested in visiting South Africa with the intention of undertaking a safari to one of South Africa's largest game reserves.

9. Conclusion

The questions that were asked with respect to the social media pages related to the number of members active of the various site related to the Kruger Park. These have been discussed under the different pages. The number of social media pages related to the Kruger Park were obtained from the SANParks' annual report. However, for the purposes of this article, attention was paid specifically to those found on Facebook. From the posts on Facebook groups, it is evident that many people consult these sites when they are interested in visiting the Kruger Park. Many international and local visitors pose questions about the game reserve and the different fauna and flora found there. In South Africa, there are many individuals from communities that were denied access to the Kruger Park under the apartheid dispensation. Many of these South Africans now have an opportunity to visit and interact on the platforms to enquire about the different fauna and flora. From the feedback from the majority of those that participated in the survey, it is clear that these social media sites, in particular the Facebook pages, have educational value as people share their sightings, experiences and knowledge related to the animals, plants and history of the game park. Many of these social media pages are monitored by officials from SanParks. They often provide comment and ensure that there is no online confrontation between members and that the location of endangered animals are not displayed for potential poachers. The social media pages of the Kruger Park provide valuable information sources for persons interested in the Kruger Park. They also provide information to local and international visitors seeking information related to forthcoming travels. These social media pages are well managed by the staff at SanParks who ensure that the communication channels remain open and encourage social synergy between all those that participate on these sites.

In the South African National Parks annual report of 2020/2021, social media engagement grew on their social media platforms, and SANParks has planned online initiatives to ensure greater reach. Audiences are engaged by means of content campaigns and themed topics. SANParks' social media platform enjoyed significant growth. YouTube subscriptions grew from 3,000 to 10,000 (a 69.3% increase), and enough watch time for SANParks videos has been generated to enable the YouTube channel to be monetised. SANParks' Instagram presence grew from 80,000 to 125,000 followers (a 35.7% increase)

and its LinkedIn presence from 23,000 to 35,000 networks (a 32% increase). All other platforms have also shown growth during 2020/2021 (South African National Parks, 2021, p. 88). The Kruger Park is South Africa's largest game reserve and has the largest variety of fauna and flora, as well as a reserve caring for the conservation of endangered species, such as black rhino, wild dog, pangolin, elephants and cheetahs. The Kruger Park has many historical sites that are relevant to all South Africans, including sites that relate to indigenous knowledge as well as rock art paintings, all of which are part of South African heritage. The Kruger Park is a living museum, library and archives and should thus be preserved and made available to interested members of the public. Social media platforms such as Facebook provide ideal platforms for interested members of the public – both South African and international visitors – who want to find out more and share the experiences that they have or may encountered while visiting this game reserve.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

- (1) How many times have you been to the Kruger Park?
- (2) How often do you visit the park?
- (3) How long have you been a member of the different Kruger Park social media sites?
- (4) What do you regard as the purpose of these social media sites?
- (5) In your opinion, how do these social media sites contribute to interest in nature conservation?
- (6) What is the educational value of these social media sites?
- (7) What are the benefits to staff and visitors to the game reserve contribute in sharing their knowledge, photographs and experiences with interested individuals?
- (8) In your opinion, what are the drawbacks (negative aspects) of these social media sites?

About the author

Prof Isabel Schellnack-Kelly is an academic in Unisa's Department of Information Science. She teaches modules related to archives and records management and supervising master's and doctoral students. She has vast experience in archives and records management having worked in the field as an archivist at the South African National Archives and a consultant involved with projects in South Africa, Uganda and Kenya. Her areas of interests are indigenous knowledge, oral history, accessing archival collections, historical discourse, records management and the use of archival resources for historical pedagogy. Isabel Schellnack-Kelly can be contacted at: schelis@unisa.ac.za

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