Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa

Volume 44 (1) 2025

School of Communication
University of Johannesburg

Communicare

Journal for Communication Studies in Africa

Volume 44 (1) 2025

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa facilitates scholarly discussion on communication phenomena in Africa and how these are in conversation with other regions. *Communicare* is a non-profit, open-access journal, in existence since 1980, published biannually by the School of Communication, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. *Communicare* uses a double-blind peer review system and is accredited by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training and listed on the Directory of Open Access Journals.

Communicare aims to serve as a point of reference for continental academic debate and geo-specific theorising. It thus invites articles that complement, test, refine or counter global theoretical perspectives by amplifying and consolidating African research and scholarship. The journal publishes original theoretical-conceptual and empirical articles regardless of paradigm, perspective or context and welcomes a wide range of methodological approaches. *Communicare* publishes articles in a broad spectrum of communication sub- and related disciplines, including organisational communication, strategic communication, marketing communication, corporate communication, development communication, social change, political communication, gender communication, health communication, postcolonial studies, identity politics and politics of everyday life, celebrity studies, visual communication, internet studies, gaming, digital communication, digital media, film studies, media studies, cultural studies, popular culture, and journalism. *Communicare* also publishes generic (non-region specific) research articles on topics relevant to scholarly conversations on communication in Africa.

COVER PAGE

Cover page design and template design courtesy of Given Dube.

EDITORIAL TEAM

EDITORIAL BOARD

The *Communicare* editorial team comprises Editor-in-Chief, Editor, Assistant Editor and Associate Editors. The team is responsible for the day-to-day editorial management of the journal's production.

The role of the editors

The Editor-in-Chief directs the journal's overall strategy and editorial policy in cooperation with the key stakeholders.

The key responsibilities of the Editors are to:

- Foster good reputation of the journal.
- Keep abreast with developments in the academic publishing environment nationally and internationally.
- Review submitted manuscripts to ensure quality and focus on the journal's scope.
- Strive for academic integrity and promote ethical research and publishing practices.
- Maintain good working relationships with authors, reviewers, editorial board members and other stakeholders.
- Enable the Editorial Board to play an active role in journal development.
- Serve as an ambassador for the journal, commissioning content and attending to enquires.
- Make impartial decisions regarding the acceptance or rejection of manuscripts.
- Promote academic pluralism in communication studies.

The editors of *Communicare* subscribe to the Committee on Publication Ethics' *Code of conduct and best practice guidelines for journal editors* (https://publicationethics.org/files/Code_of_conduct_for_journal_editors_Mar11.pdf)

The role of the editorial board

Communicare operates under the guidance of the Editorial Board, whose members are selected for their expertise. Responsibilities of the Editorial Board include but are not limited to:

- Making recommendations on the editorial policy of *Communicare*.
- Reviewing the manuscripts submitted to the journal.
- Acting as ambassadors for *Communicare*.
- Promoting the journal whenever possible.
- Actively encouraging submissions to *Communicare* by new and established authors.
- Occasionally publishing their own work in the journal.
- Suggesting topics for special issues.
- Accepting invitations to write editorials and commentaries on papers in their specialist area.
- Attending and contributing to Editorial Board meetings.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

Communicare is committed to upholding the integrity of the scholarly record. The journal editors, peer reviewers and authors are expected to follow the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines on professional publishing standards available from https://publicationethics.org/core-practices

SUBMISSIONS

Communicare accepts a variety of articles that contribute to contemporary scholarly debates on communication studies in Africa.

Full-length theoretical, conceptual and empirical research articles 5000-8000words all-inclusive (**at first submission**).

Practice-based case studies (2500-4000 words).

Editorials, commentaries and book reviews (750-2500 words).

Submission Preparation Checklist

As part of the submission process, authors are required to check off their submission's compliance with all the following items, and submissions may be returned to authors that do not adhere to these guidelines.

- Submit the manuscript with an abstract (anonymous).
- Submit a separate information sheet with author(s) details: title, name, email, ORCID, institutional affiliation and country. **This item is compulsory.**
- For technical reasons, the submitting author will be considered the corresponding author
- Submit Turnitin or iThenticate report. Similarity should not exceed 15%.
- The article has not been previously published, nor is it before another journal for consideration.
- The length of the manuscripts complies with the prescribed length at submission (5000-8000 words for a full-length article, 3000-4500 practice-based case study, 750-2500 editorial, commentary, book review).
- The length of the abstract is 200-250 words.
- The manuscript adheres to the stylistic and bibliographic requirements outlined in the Author Guidelines.
- Harvard referencing style has been used.
- The manuscript has been proofread and/or language edited, at a minimum using free software such as Grammarly.
- The manuscript does not contain any information that may identify the author(s).
- I have read *Communicare's* article processing charges policy.
- I am aware that noncompliant submission may be rejected.

Author guidelines

Communicare accepts a variety of articles that contribute to contemporary scholarly debates on communication studies in Africa.

Authors must ensure the following:

- Only original, unpublished work of the author/s, not under consideration for publication elsewhere, will be considered by *Communicare*.
- All authors significantly contributed to the research design, execution and/or writing of the article.
- Results are based on data that was not fabricated, falsified or inappropriately manipulated.
- Authors should comply with ethical research standards.
- This includes disclosing funding sources or any other support for the execution of research.
- The data should be recent – not exceeding 4 years since data collection
- Manuscripts should adhere to all the guidelines for authors. **Manuscripts not conforming to these guidelines may be returned to the author.**
- It is the responsibility of the author/s to obtain permission to use copyrighted material, and proof of such permission should be submitted with the initial manuscript.

- **Manuscripts should not contain any information that may identify the author(s).**
- Acknowledgements should not appear anywhere in the manuscript submitted for review. Once the article is accepted, acknowledgements should be included in the final version of the manuscript. Acknowledgements are placed at the end of the article before references.
- Authors should declare a conflict of interest that may have influenced the work or its results.
- Authors should not re-submit a manuscript previously rejected by *Communicare*, unless they were invited by the editor to do so.
- As a rule, *Communicare* does not consider multiple submissions from the same author(s) at the same time.
- Manuscripts based on students' dissertations and theses:
  The articles should not be merely a summary of the thesis but should be significantly reworked (50%) and the author is requested to provide a separate latter indicating how the submitted manuscript differs from the original work.

Authors must submit **THREE** documents: the **manuscript** and **the information sheet** and the **similarity report** (e.g. Turnitin) not exceeding 15%.

The manuscript should include a title and be accompanied by an abstract. Abstracts should be a precis (150–250 words) of the research undertaken, highlighting the salient findings. The abstract should not contain any references.

The authors should provide up to 6 keywords in alphabetical order which will be used for indexing and online search purposes. Each key word must be uploaded individually when submitting the article.

The authors should also submit the author's **information sheet** containing:

- Informative but concise title of the article
- The full name(s) and surnames of the author(s)
- Email addresses of the authors
- It is assumed that the author who submits the article is the corresponding author. Notify the the Editorial Team if this is not the case.
- Author's ORCID - If the author does not already have an ORCID number, one can be created on *https://orcid.org*
- Author's affiliation (organisation and country)

Incomplete submissions will not be considered.

Manuscript guidelines

- The length of a full-length manuscript at initial submission should be between 5000-8000 words, including references.
- The length of practice-based case study should be 2500-4000 words.
- The length of editorial, commentaries and book reviews 750-2500 words.
- Contributions should follow the spelling rules of South African or UK (not the US) English.
- The manuscript should be submitted in Microsoft Office Word format.
- The font used in the manuscript is: Arial 11 pt, single line spacing, not justified.
- New paragraphs should be indented, with no extra line between paragraphs.
- Tables and figures should be included in the text and the original files within which these graphics were generated (e.g. PowerPoint) are attached. Screengrabs should not be used.
- All tables and figures should be numbered separately: Table 1, 2, 3, etc. and Figure 1, 2, 3, etc. Tables and figures should be suitable for reproduction in black and white.
- Illustrations and photographs should have a minimum resolution of 300 dpi.
- Double quotation marks should be used for all quotes.
- End notes and footnotes should be avoided.
- The title must be in title case.
- Headings must not be numbered.
    - Main headings should be capitalised, bold, left-aligned.

- Second-level headings should be in a lower case, bold, left-aligned.
- Third level headings should be in italics, bold, lower case, left aligned.

- Harvard method for in-text citations and the reference list should be used.

Referencing guidelines

All references in the reference list should be cited in-text and vice versa.

The reference list must be in alphabetical order.

In-text citations:

Give only author and date, with page numbers for all quotes:

One author: (Aziz, 2021:102)

Two authors: (Gidens & Sutton, 2021:34)

More than two authors (Kujala et al., 2017:16)

Reference list entries examples: journal article, publications by the same author in one year, book, internet source with no date, chapter in the edited book, thesis, news article, internet source with a date, conference paper.

Aziz, Z.A. (2021). The influence of communication on project success: a survey of the SANRAL Gauteng e-tolling project in South Africa. *Communicare*, 40(2):101-128.

Frassinelli, P.P. (2019)a. *Borders, media crossings and the politics of translation*. London: Routledge

Frassinelli, P.P. (2019)b. Crisis? Which crisis? The humanities reloaded. *Critical Arts*, 33(3):1-15.

Giddens, A. & Sutton, P.W. (2021). *Sociology*. 9th ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Johnson, L. [n.d.]. *Will technology save the education system?* Available from: http://www.netscape.com/users/johnl/save.html

Kujala, J., Lehtimäki, H. & Myllykangas, P. (2017). Value co-creation in stakeholder relationships: A case study. In R. Freeman, J. Kujala & S. Sachs (eds.). *Stakeholder engagement: Clinical research cases*. Issues in Business Ethics, Book 46. Cham: Springer, 15–30.

Masuku, C. (2021). *Sustainability and stakeholder relationships in embedded mining communities in Zimbabwe*. Doctoral thesis. Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg. Available from: https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/vital/access/manager/Repository/uj:44054?site_name=Research+Output&exact=sm_creator%3A%22Masuku%2C+Caven%22&sort=sort_ss_title%2F

Ramphele, L. (2017). Three of SA's big banks accused of collusion. *Cape Talk*, 16 February. Available from http://www.capetalk.co.za/articles/245059/three-of-sa-s-big-banks-accused-of-collusion

Stats SA. (2019). *Living conditions*. Available from http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=595.

Wolf-Brenner, C. (2021). *Make us smile! AI and the violation of human intentions*. Paper presented at 34th Bled Conference, June 27 – 30 (online).

Please refer to previous articles published in *Communicare* for further referencing examples.

PEER REVIEW PROCESS

Research articles and review articles are subject to double peer review, whereby the authors' and reviewers' identities are concealed.

Research articles and review articles are subject to double peer review, whereby the authors' and reviewers' identities are concealed. The editorials and commentaries are reviewed by the editorial team but are not subject to double-blind peer review.

Manuscripts are submitted online. Manuscripts undergo pre-screening by the editorial office to ensure compliance with the submission guidelines and suitability for the journal.

Manuscripts are then assigned to the Editor-in-Chief to decide whether they fall under the scope of the journal. The Editor-in-Chief may seek further guidance from the Editor and/or the Associate Editors.

Manuscripts suitable for a review may undergo a similarity check using similarity detection software.

The Editor-in-Chief appoints and invites the reviewers. The Editor-in-Chief may request that the author suggests possible reviewers, however, it is up to the Editor to select reviewers recommended by authors or include reviewers who are not on the recommended list.

Once at least two reviews are received, the Editor-in-Chief decides on the manuscript. In case of conflicting reviews, the Editor may request a third review or consult members of the Editorial Board.

Revised manuscripts should be submitted via the online submission system within the time stipulated by the Editorial Team. The Editor-in-Chief makes the decision on minor and moderate revisions and refers major revisions to at least one of the original or new reviewers to seek their recommendations before making the final decision.

Accepted manuscripts are sent to the editorial office to undergo the production process, which includes copy editing and layout.

Proofs are checked by the editorial office and sent to authors for correction. Only minor corrections can be implemented at this stage. No changes can be made after the proof has been approved for publication.

The article will be published online. Once the issue is complete, the article will be allocated page numbers.

Communicare subscribes to the practice of not changing the content of a peer review report before it is shared with authors. In some cases, peer review reports may be redacted before being shared with authors to protect the reviewer's anonymity or to tackle any inappropriate language. The changes will not alter the meaning or the verdict of the reviewer about the merit or content of the manuscript under review. In some rare instances, if peer review report is offensive or unfounded, the Editor, at their discretion, may decide not to share the report with the authors.

This policy was informed by the *Committee on Publication Ethics guidelines on editing peer reviews* *https://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines/editing-peer-reviews*

REVIEWER GUIDELINES

Reviewers are selected based on their expertise. Reviewers are expected to be constructive by highlighting the problems and suggesting solutions and improvements, as well as pointing to the strong points of the manuscripts.

- Reviews should be conducted in the spirit of collegiality in substance and tone.
- The emphasis is on the academic merit within the context of the academic/research approach towards the study. For example, reflexive/interpretative/literary/exploratory/polemic/historical/critical or eclectic approaches must be reviewed theoretically and methodologically in the context of the nature of such approaches.
- Please ensure the confidentiality of the peer review process. Do not share, copy or discuss the manuscript with third parties during the review process.
- Please declare any conflict of interest to the Editor-in-Chief upon receipt of the manuscript.
- The reviewers should consider the quality of the article in terms of conceptual or empirical contribution to the field based on a strong conceptual premise, novel perspective and methodological rigour.
- It is expected that reviewers, where relevant, comment on such aspects as the title, introduction, problem statement/hypothesis, quality of literature review, the relevance of sources, appropriateness of research method and application, the relevance of analysis, clarity of writing, the significance of the contribution to the field's theory or practice.
- Make a recommendation to the Editor-in-Chief to:
    1. accept – publish as is
    2. revisions required (minor and moderate revisions)
    3. resubmit for review (major revision required)
    4. reject – article not suitable for publication
    5. submit elsewhere (article is outside the scope of the journal)

To streamline the refereeing process, Communicare will appreciate feedback within 30 days of receiving an article or resubmission.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

Communicare is committed to upholding the integrity of the scholarly record. The journal editors, peer reviewers and authors are expected to follow the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines on professional publishing standards available from *https://publicationethics.org/core-practices*

Authors

Authors must ensure the following:

- The manuscript is not submitted to other journals for consideration.
- The manuscript is original work and has not been published elsewhere.
- All authors significantly contributed to the research design, execution and/or writing of the article.
- Results are based on data that was not fabricated, falsified or inappropriately manipulated.
- Authors should comply with ethical research standards.
- When suggesting the reviewers, authors must ensure that the reviewers have the correct expertise and are not connected to or aware of the work. Communicare reserves the right not to use the reviewers suggested by authors.
- Authors should declare a conflict of interest that may have influenced the work or its results. This includes disclosing funding sources or any other support for the execution of research.
- Authors should not re-submit a manuscript previously rejected by Communicare unless they were invited by the editor to do so.

Reviewers

Reviewers should disclose competing interests and may be excluded from the review process if a conflict of interest arises.

PLAGIARISM POLICY

Manuscripts submitted to *Communicare* will be scanned for potential plagiarism, which occurs when a person uses someone else's words, concepts, ideas, data or other work, whether written or visual, as their own original intellectual work, without adequately acknowledging the original author.

For submitted manuscripts

The Editor-in-Chief will analyse manuscripts suspected of plagiarism in consultation with the Editor or Associate Editors to determine the extent of the plagiarism.

If the material has been plagiarised, the Editorial Office will inform the corresponding author that the manuscript is rejected due to plagiarism.

In the case of extensive plagiarism, the Editor-in-Chief may report the offence to the author/s' institution and/or funding bodies.

Authors will be notified about the Editor-in-Chief's response to the plagiarism.

Authors will be banned from submitting any future work to *Communicare* if they are found guilty of extensive plagiarism.

The person reporting the suspected plagiarism will be informed of the outcome of the probe.

For published articles

Manuscripts suspected of plagiarism will be analysed by the Editor-in-Chief in consultation with the Editor or Associate Editors to determine the extent of the plagiarism.

If the material has been plagiarised, the Editorial Office will inform the corresponding author.

In case of minor or not intentional plagiarism, a statement indicating the plagiarised material and appropriate reference will be published online.

In the case of extensive plagiarism, the article will be retracted, and a statement published acknowledging the original authorship.

Authors will be banned from submitting any future work to *Communicare* if they are found guilty of extensive plagiarism.

If applicable, the person reporting the suspected plagiarism will be informed of the outcome of the probe.

The Editor-in-Chief may report the offence to the author/s' institution and/or funding bodies.

Use of AI tools

Communicare conforms to the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) recommendations on chat bots, ChatGPT and scholarly manuscripts and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)'s position statement on Authorship and AI tools.

AI bots like ChatGPT cannot be credited as authors on your submission.

Authors are required to explicitly mention the use of tools powered by large language models and generative AI in the manuscript (specifying which tool was used and for what purpose), ideally in the methods or acknowledgements sections.

Authors are accountable for the accuracy, validity, and appropriateness of any content produced by tools powered by large language models and generative AI. They must also verify the correctness of cited references and ensure the submission is free from plagiarism.

Editors and reviewers are required to maintain the confidentiality of the peer review process. Editors should not share details of submitted manuscripts or peer review reports with any tools based on large language models and generative AI. Reviewers must refrain from using such tools to generate review reports.

OPEN ACCESS POLICY

Communicare articles are published with open access under an Attribution - Non-Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) licence. *https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/*

Under Creative Commons licences, authors retain the copyright of their articles. In terms of this licence, readers can copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, and alter, transform, or build upon the material, providing the original author is credited.

CORRECTIONS AND RETRACTION POLICY

As a general rule, articles published in *Communicare* will not be altered or removed. However, the authors have an obligation to inform the Editorial Office if significant mistakes are uncovered. At the discretion of the Editor-in-Chief, *Communicare* may publish a correction or retraction if a published article contains a substantial error, such as incorrectly reported research results. The publication of a correction will be indicated in the article title and on the article landing page. Typographical and other minor errors will generally not be corrected.

Under rare circumstances involving plagiarism or data error, articles may need to be retracted or replaced in order to protect academic and research integrity. In case of retraction, *Communicare* will publish a notice of retraction, which will include the title and authors of the article, the reason for the retraction and who is retracting the article. The notice will be linked to the article online and be indicated on the article landing page.

APPEALS AND COMPLAINTS

Authors have the right to appeal a decision if they believe it to be unfair. The appeal should consist of a letter explaining the nature of the appeal and specifying why the initial decision was erroneous. The letter should be sent to the Editor-in-Chief within ten days of the decision. The Editor-in-Chief will consider the appeal and may consult the Editor, Associate Editors, or members of the Editorial Board before deciding on the appeal. The decision of the Editor-in-Chief will be final.

Complaints should be sent to the Editorial Office or the Editor-in-Chief. The Editor-in-Chief shall respond to the complaint within 15 working days (excluding university holidays).

ARCHIVING POLICY

Communicare is preserved using LOCKSS, CLOCKSS and PKP PN.

ARTICLE PROCESSING CHARGES

Communicare bills article processing charges (APCs) to cover the production costs and ensure the journal's sustainability. APCs apply only to articles accepted for publication. In same case at the discretion of the Editors fees may be waivered or discounted for authors from African countries other than South Africa.

The authors who received APC waiver are not eligible for another waiver for 3 years.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in the published works do not express the views of the Editors and Editorial Staff. The authors take legal and moral responsibility for the ideas expressed in the articles. The publisher shall have no liability in the event of issuance of any claims for damages. The Publisher will not be held legally responsible should there be any claims for compensation.

Contents

RESEARCH ARTICLES

EDITORIAL

In 1831, the Royal Swedish Navy began planting oak trees on the small island of *Visingsö* in the middle of lake *Vättern*. Already the forebears of the modern Swedes, the fearsome Vikings, knew that oak is the perfect material for shipbuilding. Not only is the wood immensely tough; the trees tend to grow very straight and tall. There's only one disadvantage: oaks grow slowly. If you want a large-scale steady supply of stately oaks, you must think ahead. Then again, Swedes have always prided themselves on prudent planning. In the end, a large number of trees were planted on Visingsö and left to grow. After the allocated time, the forests' caretakers duly informed the Swedish navy that the trees were ready for harvesting. That was in 1975. Needless to say, the navy's interest was limited. Although the Swedish Navy retained an oak-hulled trawler in service until 1998 – not because it's organic, but because magnetic mines don't bother about oak hulls – the timber-hulled man o' war of the 19th century was long replaced by the steel-hulled frigate of the 20th. Today, in the 21st century, the navy's most modern ships are not even steel-hulled but constructed of radar-absorbing carbon fibre and vinyl laminate.

On September 28 and 29, 2023, the University of Johannesburg's Department for Strategic Communication hosted an international conference in conjunction with its sister department at Lund University, Sweden. Under the headline *Reflect, Rethink and Reimagine: A Decade of Strategic Communication* more than 120 scholars gathered physically and virtually to look back as well as forward, to take stock of past achievements as well as think about the future. The contributions from all over the continent, and indeed the world, spanned all levels of investigation: the tricky details on micro-level, the organizational dynamics on meso-level, the convoluted and complex issues on macro-level. Eminent practitioners joined the event. Some provided inspirational and visionary highlights; others, equally important, sobering reality-checks. Last but not least, UJ's very own 'Gallery of Talent' challenged the participants with music, performances and poetry.

It was a marvellous, unforgettable event, in other words. But what did it have to do with the oaks of *Visingsö*?

The answer is multi-layered. On the first and most basic level, research is a little like oaks. It grows slowly. *Communicare*, that was clear from the beginning, would collect a selection of the contributions in a dedicated special issue. The idea was, of course, to carry the conference's momentum into the new year. But adhering to the rigorous requirements of peer-review, sometimes repeated peer-review, takes time. Thus, it took the editorial team one-and-a-half years to collate the special issue. 2023 became 2024, 2024 became 2025. As many of our colleagues and contributors have moved on to the next exciting project, the purpose of this editorial is to perhaps recapture the spirit of the event.

However, there is a another, deeper layer to the story of the oaks of *Visingsö* which connects it to the theme of the 2023 conference theme *Reflect, Rethink, Reimagine*. Clearly, the governors of the Swedish navy gave the matter of long-term supply some serious thought. *Reflecting*, they foresaw, correctly, that the demand for oak timber would skyrocket in the foreseeable future, as the European powers built and rebuilt their fleets. And they had good reasons to believe that. In the first half of the 19th century, the state-of-the-art man o' war became a curious hybrid (Brown, 1990). Warships remained wooden-hulled and continued to carry a full rig of sails and shrouds. At the time, the innovation lay in the primitive auxiliary steam engine that drove a 'screw', the forebear of the modern propeller. Although the screw provided an important tactical advantage by allowing wind-independent manoeuvre, the ship-of-the line of the 1840ies was superficially indistinguishable from its forebears of the Napoleonic Wars.

What the Swedish Navy did in 1831, thus, was to *extrapolate* the current development path into the future: wooden hulls = demand of oak. What they did not do – perhaps because it was not their task to do so – was to *rethink* and *reimagine*. Yet, as the Germans say, predictions are particularly troublesome when they are concerned with the future. In 1860 – with the *Visingsö* oaks barely out of their nappies – Britain's Royal Navy commissioned *HMS Warrior*, the first seagoing warship with an iron hull. Only 17 years later, *HMS Iris* marked another first, going from iron to steel. The wooden-hulled warship did not disappear overnight, of course. Eventually, however, only the wooden-hulled minesweepers, like Sweden's *HMS Gåssten*, were left.

In Sweden, the story of the *Visingsö* oaks is well-known as a cautionary tale against simply extrapolating the present into the future. Yet it is also read as a positive tale of prudent planning. And, on yet another level, it is understood as encouragement to make the best of miscalculations. Swedes are rightfully proud that their ancestors were capable of planning ahead for 150 years, and the spirit of thoughtful long-term planning has endured in Swedish government until today. But the Swedish people also enjoy a stroll and a chuckle in the beautiful oak forest of *Visingsö* which is now administered by the National Property Board. Sparingly harvested, the timber is still used for fine boats, by the way. And Visingsö oak makes for great whiskey barrels as well.

This Special Issue of *Communicare* contains eight articles which, taken together, run the gamut of reflecting, rethinking, and reimagining. To begin with, **Nina Overton-de Klerk** and this author tried their hands at a metamodernist rethink of our current conception of rationality, reimagining the strategic communication-world in metamodern terms (Nothhaft & Overton-de Klerk 2025). Whether the authors correctly predict what kind of ship the future brings remains to be seen. But whiskey barrels and a stroll in the forest are not a bad thing either.

On the other end of the spectrum – reflective, yet less speculative, more empirical, closer to practice – is the contribution of **Yolanda Makhubele, Anna Oksiutycz and Elizabeth Lubinga** (Makhubele et al 2025). The authors report the results of interviews with South African agency representatives. Amongst other results, it is encouraging to read, in our age of AI, that 'chemistry' between people continues to play a key role.

In a similar vein, the article by **Dalien René Benecke, Corné Meintjes, Padhma Moodley, Lida Holzhausen, Anette Degenaar and Neil Levy** (Benecke et al., 2025) reminds us of the human aspects in the ostensibly rational world of modern corporations. Their article (Benecke et al., 2025) reports a Delphi study conducted with South African public relations practitioners as part of a global research project. The results point to a strange, yet strangely familiar discrepancy. On the one hand, organizations pay lip-service to the strategic importance of communication, on the other side, actual organizational power and influence lag far behind.

Moving from practice to academia, **María Ruiz Carreras, Jörgen Eksell, Marja Åkerström and Howard Nothhaft** (Carreras et al., 2025) report interviews conducted with programme directors in strategic communication. The results suggests that there is very little agreement amongst educators on what strategic communication-programmes are supposed to achieve. Teachers and researchers seem to emancipate from their 'proper' home disciplines, gradually, but whether higher education in the field should be practical, theoretical, critical, or any combination thereof, remains an open question.

Going from the rather small world of higher education to the big world of global competition, **Caroline Azionya's** (Azionya 2025) article is situated at the sweet spot between a plausible extrapolation of the current situation on one side, and a fundamental rethink and reimagining on the other. Grounded in an extensive literature review, Azionya offers a systematic (re-)conceptualization of the currently ongoing 'AI arms race'[1] between the 'superintermediaries', i.e. the dominant enablers of our brave new social media world.

On a similar macro-sociological level, **Keyan Tomaselli's and Addamms Mututa's** (Tomaselli & Mututa 2025) article "Strategic Communication Futures: Paradigm and Practice in a Polycrisis World" is another contribution that challenges us to rethink – big time. If you ever wondered about the connection between modern academia and Soviet-style accounting, turn to this *tour de force*. Ranging far and wide with considerable flair, the authors offer a fundamental rewrite of what is really going in academia and research, be it modern, postmodern or metamodern.

1 Interestingly, to return to shipbuilding, the best-studied arms race is the naval arms race in the early years of the 20th century that led to World War One.

Of course, as a practitioner or academic with a practical assignment on your hands, conceptual tools is what you require. The contribution by **Jacobus de Villiers, Anette Degenaar and Lynnette Fourie** (de Villiers et al. 2025) is concerned with strategic communication in the context of higher education, where students, while studying, are internal stakeholders. Yet upon graduation, they become external stakeholders, alumni, ambassadors. The contribution systematically surveys an enormous amount of literature. Not only do the authors chart a course through the bewildering terminological labyrinth created by the bandying around of key terms like 'strategy', 'identity', 'image', 'reputation' and 'brand.' They also include a call to rethink the complexities that arise when universities use students and students use universities for their own purposes, respectively.

The article by **Annette Degenaar, Lynette Fourie and Lida Holtzhausen** (Degenaar et. al 2025), finally, offers a similar conceptual clarification, giving practitioners well-developed 'mindtools' so that they can concentrate on the issues at hand. The authors investigate whether Niemann's model of strategic integrated communication transfers to the special requirements of child-protection organizations. Their article also serves as a reminder that national discourses are sometimes far ahead, and better developed, than the international discussion. For example, the question of 'strategic consistency' has been internationally on the backburner for a while, only having been revisited recently under the headline of 'alignment' (Volk & Zerfass, 2018).

What remains, then, is the hope that this Special Issue will rekindle the spirit of the 2023 in the authors, and perhaps in some readers as well. Academics are trained to always reflect on their actions, and we are normally pretty good at it. But the organizers of the conference did not choose the title *Reflect, Rethink, Reimagine* for the fine ring of its words only. Let us ask ourselves, then, how convincing higher education's track record is when it comes to rethinking and reimagining – but being right about it. Then again, history seems to show that you can't go much wrong with planting a tree (an indigenous and non-invasive one, of course).

Howard Nothhaft
Guest Editor - Special Issue

References

Azionya, C.M. (2025). GPTs and Digital Superintermediaries: Dynamics, Dilemmas, Dangers of Generative AI. A Conceptual Framework. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 44(1), 92-106.

Benecke, D.R., Meintjes, C., Moodley., P., Holtzhausen, L. Degenaar, A & Levy, N. (2025). Using a Delphi method in the Future of PR and Communication Global Study: South African Findings on Social Impact and PR Education. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 44(1), 107-123.

Brown, D. K. (1990). *Before the Ironclad. Warship Design and Development* 1815-1860. Seaforth Publishing.

Carreras, M.R., Eksell, J., Åkeström , M. & Nothhaft, H. (2025). Theory vs Practice: Perceptions of Professionalisation in Strategic Communication Education. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 44(1), 56-73.

Degenaar, A., Fourie, L. & Holtzhausen, L. (2025). Stakeholder relationships in the Child Protection Organisation (CPO) sector: A Strategic Integrated Communication Approach. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 44(1), 74-91.

de Villiers, J.M, Degenaar, A & Fourie, L. (2025). Trends in Research on Strategic Communication, Strategic Integrated Communication, Personal Branding and Brand Advocacy in the Context of Higher Education. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 44(1), 36-55.

Nothhaft, H. & Overton-de Klerk, N. (2025). Strategic Communication and Metamodernism. Shall We Dance? *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 44(1), 4-23.

Makhubele, Y., Oksiutycz, A. & Lubinga, E. (2025). Sustainability and Expectations in Client-Public Relations Agency Relationships: A Bi-directional Perspective. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 44(1), 124-136.

Mututa, A & Tomaselli, K.G. (2025). Strategic Communication Futures: Paradigm and Practice in a Polycrisis World. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 44(1), 24-35.

Volk, S. C., & Zerfass, A. (2018). Alignment: Explicating a Key Concept in Strategic Communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), 433–451. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1452742

Strategic Communication and Metamodernism. Shall We Dance?

Towards Complexity Beyond Linear Compromise

AUTHOR(S)
Howard Nothhaft
Lund University, Sweden
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4576-6205
Nina Overton-de Klerk
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7466-8837

PUBLISHED ONLINE
Volume 44 (1) May 2025
Pages 4-23
Submitted August 2024
Accepted March 2025

DOI
10.36615/ka65me09

ISSN
Online 2957-7950
Print 0259-0069

Abstract

This article is the result of further joint reflection by the authors, building on their previous arguments that the shifts that gave rise to strategic communication as a discipline suggest linear compromises between modernism and postmodernism. It also provides a scrutiny of metamodernism as a contemporary academic agenda within a complexity framework, and explores whether strategic communication has to an extent not always shown elements of metamodernism. Following an analysis of key figures of metamodern thought and introducing the "dance" of the double pendulum as a metaphor, the authors discuss key challenges that metamodern thinking poses to strategic communication scholars. These require, among other things, a commitment to the species, ironic sincerity, a commitment to complexity on the problem as well as on the solution side, and a "both–and" realist epistemology and constructionist epistemology at the same time. In conclusion, implications for strategic communication are put forward.

Keywords

Complexity, constructionist epistemology, double pendulum, human nature, imagined communities, ironic sincerity, linear compromise, metamodernism, modernism, oscillation, postmodernism, realist epistemology, strategic communication

INTRODUCTION

This article wants to open the floor for a broader, philosophical discussion of strategic communication. The idea we develop is meant as a stimulus, not as an authoritative contribution. Our argument, perhaps provocative, is that strategic communication has been a metamodern academic project without knowing it. Many of the identity issues the discipline suffers from are because the metamodern tensions at its core are inadequately understood – by us, but also by outside observers.

The key issue is and has always been *complexity*. The second author has pointed out in several contexts that predictions based on current, largely postmodernist-inspired social theory are not borne out by the current state of the world, and even appear downright naïve in retrospect (Overton-de Klerk, 2023). It can be argued, therefore, that macro-level strategic communication theory – largely based on postmodernist-inspired social theory – in turn, does not reach the levels of complexity it requires to adequately treat its chosen topics.

On an abstract level, it has been argued that applied communication disciplines are "pulled down" into intellectual poverty by other forces (Peters, 1986; see also Dühring, 2015; Ferguson, 2018), and here we agree. Specifically, the applied communication disciplines' *practical focus* has been identified as the millstone around our neck that prevents us from reaching adequate theoretical heights (Nothhaft and Zerfass, 2023). Here we disagree. Our countersuggestion is that strategic communication is being held back by its attempts to achieve a linear compromise between the modernist and postmodernist influences built into the discipline. In other words, strategic communication tries too hard to simultaneously meet modern and postmodern expectations of a "proper" academic discipline.

To take the next step after postmodernism, to go beyond a compromise between the two, is, of course, the essence of the metamodern project that has been gaining traction since around 2010. Consequently, if we seek to unlock the potential of strategic communication as an intellectual agenda, we should perhaps engage in some metamodern theorising. There are two ways to do so, as pursued in the article's second and third sections. In the second section, we trace the emergence of metamodernism as an academic agenda. The underlying assumption here is that the way to understand metamodernism is to understand the *zeitgeist* that led to its formulation. The question we ask of readers is whether or not the argumentative patterns of metamodernism appear strangely familiar to strategic communication scholars. In the third section, we follow a different path by presenting key figures of metamodern thought. Here the question is whether or not the answers given to metamodern questions could be answers for strategic communication theory as well. In the fourth section, we challenge strategic communication theorists with a reimagined agenda consisting of five questions, followed by some proposed answers in the fifth and final section with respect to the potential implications of these questions for strategic communication.

Clarification: Being metamodern without knowing it

What does it mean to say that strategic communication "is" or "has been" metamodern; how does a phrase such as "without knowing it" relate to an academic discipline; and what do we mean by strategic communication's metamodern rationality? To say that strategic communication is and always has been metamodern must not be misunderstood as the postulation of some hitherto hidden, immutable quality. What the academic project strategic communication is or does obviously results from discursive processes. However, even if one grants that, one can still ask what forces shaped the discourse. Why did the discourse gravitate towards specific figures of thought and not others? It is here that our diagnosis lies.

At the time of its inception – roughly the decade leading up to the inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* (IJSC) in 2007 – the social sciences in general, and the applied communication disciplines in particular, faced shifts in society that existing paradigms did not capture adequately. These shifts included a new media-communication fluidity, the exponential rise of social media platforms, the power shift from institutional communicators to individual recipients and the great financial crisis of 2007–2008, which wreaked havoc in financial markets around the world (Overton-de Klerk and Verwey, 2013). Strategic communication, to a large degree, is the result of trying to theoretically and empirically grasp these shifts.

At the same time, strategic communication was formulated in response not only to societal upheavals, but also to an intellectual climate in academia that became increasingly global, relativist, activist – "progressive". Given the necessity to carve out a niche for a new subdiscipline in the concert of the applied communication disciplines, strategic communication theorists had to deal with the indeterminate and confusing coexistence of postmodern and late modern intellectual streams. In this sense, in trying to take the next step after postmodernism, strategic communication is metamodern.

To speak of strategic communication as metamodern then captures a congruence between the way strategic communication and metamodern theorists come to grips with shifts in society and conceptualise adequate social theory. To date, the terms "metamodern", "metamodernism" or "metamodernity" do not appear even once in the IJSC, so it is not a matter of self-identifying as *metamodernist*. However, we do not believe it necessary for a scholarly community or research agenda to self-identify as metamodern to be so. What counts, once again, is determination to go beyond the vague and indeterminate coexistence of late modern and postmodern theorising.

The dangers of half-baked compromises

The dangers of half-baked compromises warrant further investigation. The issue can be made clearer by making it concrete. While we do not wish to go into definitional debates here, we believe it is symptomatic of strategic communication's current "semi-metamodernist" state that the seminal article in the IJSC's inaugural issue in 2007 (Hallahan et al., 2007) seemingly effortlessly brought together authors radically different in outlook. With Anthony Giddens as a major influence (Zerfass, 1996) and a background in hard-nosed strategic management, Ansgar Zerfass is late modernist in outlook. In contrast, Derina Holtzhausen can lay claim to some of the most radical postmodern contributions to the field (Holtzhausen, 2012; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). Yet, after both contributed to the inaugural issue, Zerfass and Holtzhausen would go on to edit the first edition of the *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* together. There are many signs of a metamodern approach here: Tolerance for the coexistence of contradictory views, both–and thinking and *oscillation* without the need to dissolve everything in relativism. Ironic sincerity – taking our field seriously, but not so seriously that you cannot cooperate with someone who disagrees with you – is another hallmark of metamodernism.

One has to be careful, however. The strategic communication handbook was a grand attempt to unite many colleagues with many different interests in applied communication – marketing, organisational communication, public relations and many others. This horizontal integration, moreover, went bravely hand-in-hand with an attempt at vertical integration, that is, the hope for a shared epistemology and ontology. Obviously, many of the colleagues involved hoped that this compromise would be only temporary, and that the new discipline would usher in a turn towards *their* preferred agenda. We are a case in point. While the second author hoped for strategic communication to be the vehicle to achieve a break with the functionalist, modernist-inspired Grunigian paradigm (Overton-de Klerk and Verwey, 2013), the first author hoped for almost the opposite, namely that strategic communication would become public relations supercharged with a serious understanding of strategy and strategic management.

What unites us is the acknowledgement that major disruptions, such as the pandemic, the climate crisis and other events, revealed not only the shortcomings of modernist thinking but also the limitations of postmodern thought. We are well into the third decade of the 21st century, and it seems clear that postmodernism will not *overcome* modernism, just as modernity never *overcame* premodernity. The title of Bruno Latour's famous "anthropology of science", *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* (We have never been modern), expressed the idea succinctly in 1991 (Latour, 1991). Predictably, it was followed by a similarly-titled volume, Steve Redhead's *We have never been postmodern: Theory at the speed of light* 20 years later (Redhead, 2011).

Once again, it is here that the connection to metamodernism lies. The very least that strategic communication and metamodern social theory have in common is a vague awareness that some conceptualisation of post-postmodernity is required. It seems to us that many strategic communication scholars are currently casting around for a middle-of-the-road approach. This is what concerns metamodern social theorists. The tale of the man whose wife wanted him to wear black shoes while he preferred brown should serve as a warning here. The linear solution, one shoe brown and one black is clearly not the answer.[1] Oscillation between certain days of the week is a better answer. Although the man hates black shoes, he knows it is the right thing to do on Fridays when everyone in the organisation wears black to create collegiality and build culture. Thus, irrespective of his personal preference, he chooses to wear black shoes on Fridays because he truly believes it is the correct solution in this situation. He is, however, not simply compromising to keep someone else happy. One of the big divides in the future of the field, we surmise, will be between those who envision the next step as a compromise between modernity and postmodernity, and those who envision a leap towards something else.

METAMODERNISM AS A CONTEMPORARY ACADEMIC AGENDA

As outlined earlier, our way into metamodernism does not begin with the key figures of thought but with the way metamodernism positioned itself as an academic agenda. Despite enthusiasm, as strategic communication scholars, we cannot help noticing that metamodernists follow the tried and tested recipes of contemporary academic marketing. Variations in the sub streams notwithstanding, the metamodern movement, like many other new paradigms, boils down to making the case that 1) the world has changed; 2) the old ways of thinking are not appropriate and complex enough anymore for the new conditions; 3) scholarly dedication to human progress requires us to adopt new ways of thinking in order to 4) ward off impending catastrophe and/or achieve the full potential of humanity.[2]

On the following pages, we trace metamodernism on the four levels of buy-in. However, as we use only the broadest of brushstrokes, three preliminary remarks are in order:

1. First, to avoid confusion, we refer to "metamodernism" and not "metamodernity", although these terms are often used interchangeably by many of the authors we discuss.
2. Second, we devote very little effort into tracing subtle differences within the movement.
3. Third and conversely, we do not limit ourselves to authors who self-identify as metamodernist.

As for the first point, it is noted that, according to some theorists, the -ity suffix (e.g. metamodernity, modernity and postmodernity) indicates a historical period, while the -ism suffix (e.g. metamodernism, modernism or postmodernism) indicates a cultural movement or worldview (Clarke, 2006; Irvine, 2014; Jerath, 2021). According to Daniel Görtz, main author of the Hanzi Freinacht series, metamodernism is not a "period" but more of a qualitative category, a meaningful explanatory and descriptive category. Metamodernism so far only truly exists in the realm of art and culture and is slowly taking form as a philosophy and a type of scientific and academic perspective. "Hence, it is too early to meaningfully speak of 'metamodernity' (a stage of society) other than as a potential – first it has to start to inform greater agency and more projects in the world, then take on institutional and governance forms, and begin to shift norms and sensibilities of more significant populations" (Görtz, 2024). Görtz cautions, therefore, "Only once these criteria are met, there could be something more concrete to point towards as 'metamodernity'" (Görtz, 2024; also see Freinacht, 2024).

As for the second point, metamodernism remains a small theoretical field with a handful of authors who do not refer much to one another, focus on different areas and insist that there is no "one" perspective. Vermeulen and van den Akker and the authors gathered in the Notes on *Metamodernism* project (www.metamodernism.com) are mostly interested in arts and popular culture. Storm (2021) pursues a philosophical project with the emphasis on new epistemology and ontology. Hanzi Freinacht[3] considerably expanded metamodernism into a comprehensive philosophical paradigm with a more robust theoretical framework, also described by interdisciplinary researchers as the basis for a new scientific inquiry called "archmodernity" (Barker et al. 2023–2024). Freinacht's work can be described as an ambitious emancipative, pedagogical-cultural agenda with strong ties to universal history. It currently consists of extensive blog writing on multiple topics in social theory under the headline *Metamoderna* and *Medium blog*, and three books *The Listening Society* (Freinacht, 2017), *Nordic Ideology* (Freinacht, 2019) and *12 Commandments: For extraordinary people to master ordinary life* (Freinacht, 2022).

The *Nordic Bildung* project is similar in outlook, although perhaps more conventional. Lene Andersen (2019) of *Nordic Bildung*, it should be noted, now uses the term "polymodernity" instead of metamodernity to include premodern (traditional or indigenous) codes as well (Andersen, 2023). Görtz (2024), while believing it has merit, warns however that inclusion of premodern codes too often in practice becomes "a trojan for falling back into magical thinking, New Age ideation, cult-like social dynamics, and dogmatic religion, in practice increasingly insulating the 'integral' movement from engagement with the mainstream modern world, academia particularly".

Within the metamodern community, others have taken up the baton of expanding upon spirituality and religion from a metamodern perspective. "Metamodern Spirituality" is quite a lively community on Facebook. The prime mover in this context is Brendan Dempsey, editor of the *Metamodern Spirituality Series*, a focus point for metamodern contributions, although contributions such as *Emergentism: A Religion of Complexity for the Metamodern World* (Adyahanzi and Dempsey, 2022) are not always easily digestible.

Despite the variety, there is enough agreement, in our view, to treat the work of the various metamodernists as concerned with the same thing: sketching post-postmodernity as a universal human agenda. In fact, and this is the third point, we would even count in a number of other, seemingly unrelated authors as metamodern or proto-metamodern. Many pages of Lene Andersen's *Metamodernity: Meaning and hope in a complex world* (2019) draw heavily on arguments familiar from Yual Noah Harari's bestsellers Sapiens (Harari, 2011) and *Homo Deus* (Harari, 2017), for example. Harari offers a universal history of humanity – if ever there was an author that acknowledges the coexistence of the postmodern, modern and premodern human in one, it is Harari's. Similarly, it is not a coincidence that Storm's disciplinary home lies in religious studies, a field which acknowledges the universality of religious practices as an enabler of human civilisation. Many of the arguments fielded by Harari, and by extension Andersen and Storm, in turn, are drawn from evolutionary psychology, that is, authors such as John Tooby, Leda Cosmides, David Buss, Robin Dunbar and Edward Wilson. Moreover, Harari also stands in the tradition of works that construe humanity's cultural and political achievements as results of environmental pressures, for example Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* (Diamond, 2017 [1997]).

First level of buy-in: A networked, interconnected world

On the first and most fundamental level, metamodernism offers the diagnosis that the world has fundamentally changed, and analyses in which ways it has changed. Although there is certainly something to learn from metamodernists' take on popular culture – especially from Vermeulen and van den Akker as well as Freinacht – the metamodern analysis is not particularly surprising for strategic communication scholars. Metamodernism does not differ radically from other attempts in its understanding of our time. Many figures of thought are well known to strategic communication researchers who read their Castells (Castells, 1996; Castells, 1997; Castells, 1998), and have since followed the development of the communicative constitution of organisations (CCO) perspective (e.g. Bisel, 2010; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen & Clark, 2011; Schoeneborn & Vásquez, 2017). Colleagues in strategic communication will not be surprised to hear, for example, that the new world is a world of networks, and that the nodes of the network may not only be humans.

It is fair to say that postmodernists and metamodernists overlap in their analysis of the challenges facing humanity. But there are also differences. With far less at stake, metamodernist-inspired thinkers find it easy to admit that the world has not followed the postmodern projection. Overton-de Klerk draws attention to the fact, for example, that many societies are sliding back into typically modern (nationalism, hierarchic or top-down-management of the pandemic, for example) or premodern patterns (witch-hunts and pogroms, religious extremism). She advocates for a move towards metamodernism exactly for that reason, as it is becoming increasingly obvious that postmodernism does not provide adequate answers to new questions arising from observable developments (Overton-de Klerk, 2023). Similarly, in their recent work on archdisciplinarity, Barker et al. (2023–2024:38–39) describe metamodernism as "not only the next movement in culture temporally (i.e., the way Modernism followed Romanticism, and Postmodernism followed Modernism, etc.), but developmentally and logically". The authors write: "In this way, metamodernism is not only different, but normatively progressive, since it integrates more of what came before" (2023–2024:38–39).

Second level of buy-in: The years of plenty, pastiche and parataxis

A similar overlap between postmodernist and metamodernism exists in the analysis of what went wrong, what the "old" is in the old world. Metamodernism is indebted to postmodernism in its analysis of the old ways of thinking, and why they are not appropriate for the new world. What is new (apart from a concern with artificial intelligence that was simply not on the agenda earlier), is the criticism of postmodernism as belonging to the old world. Vermeulen and van den Akker begin their Notes on Metamodernism, perhaps the most important "manifesto" of metamodernism, with the assertion that "the postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010:1).

The relationship between postmodernism and metamodernism is complex then. Many metamodern arguments have clearly developed as a counter to postmodernism, yet metamodernists are careful not to exhaust themselves in mere opposition. Above all, they tend to refuse to meet postmodernism on its own relativist, subjectivist grounds. One could accuse metamodernists of sometimes grossly oversimplifying postmodernism but, then again, postmodernism can be accused of grossly overcomplicating itself. Andersen's straightforward attempt at defining modernism and postmodernism, respectively, is symptomatic of metamodern refusal to be drawn into self-referential language games. Postmodernism is defined pragmatically by its impact: "Younger generations who grew up in the West in the 1990s, grew up in a highly postmodern world with few solid norms and moral values". Modernism, similarly, is defined by the attitudes of the ordinary citizen as shaped by their respective youth: "Older generations grew up in a modern world with rather solid norms and trusting science, democracy and their respective nation states" (Andersen, 2019:16).

The one thing metamodernists agree on is that postmodernism was too powerful, and still is, to be simply dismissed as passé. "Postmodernism left behind a set of philosophical challenges and models that linger in academic life". Storm (2021:2) cautions "… if you are a scholar in the humanities or social sciences today you have almost certainly imbibed, without realizing it, a set of unquestioned convictions that originated in postmodernism". In the most condemning moments, then, postmodernism is retrospectively construed as an unhelpful language game dreamed up by a rather parochial elite. Lene Andersen (2019:111) of *Nordic Bildung* remains rather benign in her criticism: "Postmodernism is a bit like taking a clock apart and not having any clue about how to put it back together again; afterwards, you have no idea what time it is". Storm (2021:6), perhaps the most nuanced metamodern critic, appears the most frustrated:

> This is a book for people who are sick of "Theory". People who are tired of gratuitous namedropping; anti-authoritarian arguments from authority; shallow insights masked in obscurantism; self-loathing humans claiming to represent the agency of microbes; Americanization masquerading as diversification; and most crucially, theory that is merely jargon overlaid on predetermined political judgments. This a book for people who wish that more scholars in the humanities and social sciences chose theories based on empirical adequacy instead of prior ideological commitments.

Storm points out that postmodernist theory can be traced back to a few elite thinkers comfortably ensconced in academic and cultural privilege: "Even at its heights, postmodernism seemed to refer not to a global pattern, but to narrow and selective groupings of Euro-American cultural production" (Storm, 2021:12). He does not deny good intentions, in principle, but asserts that postmodernism is in a dead end: "Postmodern skepticism was supposed to be liberating, but it failed us" (Storm, 2021:2). Probably unknowingly, he echoes the criticism formulated by Wilson a quarter century ago in response to postmodernism's overused metaphor of dreaming: "Scientists, awake and held responsible for what they say while awake, have not found postmodernism useful" (Wilson, 1998:45).

However, in the most appreciative moments, postmodernism is also acknowledged by the very same authors as a necessary interim stage: slightly neurotic perhaps, but also cathartic. By and large, this is also our personal view. For all the confusion it sowed, postmodernism brought a lot of healthy questioning – except, of course, when it came to questioning itself. But Storm believes in taking the next step: "Postmodern doubt can be made to doubt itself", he contends, "and when cleansed of its negative dogmatism and lingering longing for lost certainties it can show us the way toward humble, emancipatory knowledge" (Storm, 2021:4) Even Wilson acknowledges it, albeit tongue in cheek: "Nevertheless, here is a salute to the postmodernists. As today's celebrants of corybantic Romanticism, they enrich culture. They say to the rest of us: Maybe, just maybe, you are wrong" (Wilson, 1998:46). He cannot help adding, however, that postmodernists will not leave much of lasting value: "Their ideas are like sparks from firework explosions that travel away in all directions, devoid of following energy, soon to wink out in the dimensionless dark. Yet a few will endure long enough to cast light on unexpected subjects" (Wilson, 1998: 46).

As for the criticism of modernism and premodernism, many of metamodernism's key arguments, once again, are well known from postmodernism. At the end of the day, the metamodernist argument is that the institutions of modernism and premodernism all suffered from one flaw: over the millennia, the blessings won through the sufferings of many, at the expense of the planet and its eco-system, accrued only to few. Humanity can do better for itself and the rest of the planet.

Third level of buy-in: New ways of thinking

Metamodernism's greatest strength, in our view, lies on the third level: new ways of thinking. Contrary to many other paradigms, metamodernism does not simply offer a linear extrapolation of the current trajectory, which would be more deconstruction, more relativism, more subjectivism, more emergence. Metamodernism potentially offers some materially new ways of dealing with challenges, which departs from linear, one-dimensional solutions (Overton-de Klerk, 2023). That is not always easy to see, however. Admittedly, metamodernism continues the time-honoured tradition of identifying "complexity" as the root of all evils *and* postulating it as the solution, much as the systems theorists of the 1970s did. Metamodernism also does so by building on the well-known pattern of the *conjunctio oppositorum*, the Hegelian pattern of thesis–antithesis–synthesis. Freinacht makes very clear that this is indeed the formula, but he also points out that the synthesis is by no means a linear formula of splitting the difference or finding a middle ground: "It is not just taking the best from modernity and postmodernity, or finding a middle ground between these two poles, nor is it the ability to reach a compromise", Freinacht (2023) writes. "No, it is the ability to synthesize apparent opposites and from theses and anti-theses construct new syntheses: .... we are 100% biological animals and 100% culturally adapted beings, not 50/50."

Thus, the real question is whether the synthesis remains a bland, generic linear extrapolation, or whether it illuminates questions of the time in a non-linear fashion. We would argue that metamodernism is helpful here. Consequently, large parts of the rest of the article are devoted to key figures of thought.

Fourth level of buy-in: Key to overcoming the current challenges

Finally, as for the fourth level, the issue of warding off impending catastrophe and unlocking humanity's potential, metamodernism once again offers a familiar cocktail of gloom and hope. Predictably, the new paradigm is presented as the key to overcoming the current challenges, unlocking humanity's full potential and realising a better world for all. One stream, Nordic Bildung, runs under the headline *Metamodernity: Meaning and hope in a complex world.*[4] Given the enthusiasm that accompanied the advent of social media in the wake of the "Arab Spring" in the 2010s, and the disillusionment with social media-induced disinformation and polarisation a decade later, it is not always clear where the new metamodernist argument for rejuvenation lies. As Görtz pointed out earlier, it is perhaps simply too early to tell. While we believe that metamodernism offers some new tools of the mind (new, yet strangely familiar to strategic communication scholars), one should admit that it remains to be seen whether these tools work.

KEY FIGURES OF METAMODERN THOUGHT

If our critical analysis left the impression that metamodernism is rather unsurprising, it should be remembered what our point of departure was. Many of the metamodern arguments for new ways of thinking are the very same strategic communication scholars have fielded for at least a decade to turn organisations towards more "communicative" ways of thinking: a networked society, a co-creational economy, etc.[5] For that reason, our analysis focuses on the areas of overlap with strategic communication, and the contributions that are materially, rather than merely rhetorically, new.

A commitment to the species

One of the most noticeable differences between postmodernist and metamodernist texts lies in the way the two traditions refer to the human being. With their strong emphasis on subjectivity, postmodernists tried to avoid biological categories. The denial of human nature in postmodern social theory, often at the cost of considerable argumentative contortion, is exhaustively documented in Pinker's *The Blank Slate* (Pinker, 2003).

Metamodernists, in contrast, embrace an understanding of humanity as a biological species with a specific evolutionary history. At the same time, metamodernists agree with postmodernists in deconstructing hard-and-fast conceptions of race, nationality or other categories. The acknowledgement of shared ancestry as a genetic fact has far-reaching implications. One is that the commitment to the species provides a basis for solidarity that goes beyond relativist constructs such as culture, ethnicity or nationality. Demagogues may come up with all kinds of explanations why a particular culture, religion or skin colour is special, but our shared genetic ancestry reminds us that everyone's blood is red.

A second, subtler and perhaps more problematic assertion is that defining humans as a species removes the aura of unfathomability from human affairs. If humans are a biological species, it should be possible, as with any other species, to determine the conditions that keep individuals as well as collectives happy. In the age of AI, this conjures up images of the mental slavery of *The Matrix* or Aldous Huxley's soma-induced ignorant bliss in *Brave New World*. But things might be more complicated. We suspect that happiness criteria for humans contain reflexive conditions such as self-determination and open-endedness. Humans will not be happy if someone else tries to engineer their happiness. Homo sapiens apparently needs mystery and enchantment in its life. In any case, what is relevant for our argument is the underlying conviction that modern science is making progress. We might never know a formulaic answer to the question about what makes humans happy, but modern science has narrowed down the search considerably. Andersen (2019: 37), in her short overview of metamodernism, raises "Who do we want to be as a species?" as one of the key questions of metamodernism. We would like to think that the qualifier "as a species" conveys the idea of "fitting in with other species".

Commitment to complexity on the problem as well as the solution side

Postmodernism has admittedly always placed considerable emphasis on complexity. We argue, however, that postmodernists have only ever engaged halfway. Postmodernists were always quick to acknowledge complexity on the problem side of the equation, that is, postmodern thinking delivered increasingly nuanced and sophisticated renderings of the problem. But when it came to the solution side, postmodern thinkers tended to talk themselves out of putting their cards on the table. Probably, that was the reason postmodernism worked well in arts and culture but did not have a major impact on science and engineering. The novels by the postmodern Italian medievalist, philosopher and novelist Umberto Eco are enjoyable because of playfulness and ambiguity, but the management of electricity grids or the control of pandemics does not benefit from a playful spirit of ambiguity.

As a consequence, one of the differences between complexity in the postmodern and metamodern sense, respectively, is the way complexity is construed in relation to science. Postmodernists have tended to use complexity as a signifier for a world beyond the hard-and-fast rules of modern science, a realm where science breaks down. Given the revelations of the Sokal Affair (Sokal, 2010) and the Grievance Studies Project (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020), Wilson perhaps polemically, but not entirely unfairly, summarises postmodernity's "posture" towards scientific knowledge as "one of subversion": "There appears to be a provisional acceptance of gravity, the periodic table, astrophysics, and similar stanchions of the external world, but in general the scientific culture is viewed as just another way of knowing, and, moreover, contrived mostly by European and American white males" (Wilson, 1998:45). Metamodernists acknowledge that the scientific method delivers much more than an "alternative" way of thinking yet remain aware that scientific explanations are simply not all there is. As Overton-de Klerk (2023:13)puts it:

> Complexity thinking is not in conflict with or opposed to empiricism or the scientific replication of results as found in a positivist approach or quantitative methodology. The difference is that, unlike in strictly positivist research paradigms, findings are – from a complexity thinking perspective – not seen as absolute or fixed, but relative to the context in which they occur.

Put very concretely: The sinking of the Titanic (Nothhaft & Seiffert-Brockmann, 2023) can be explained as caused by a collision with an iceberg which resulted in a 90m long gash in the ship's side and led to flooding of six of its 16 watertight compartments. However, it can also be meaningfully understood as the result of the hubris (excessive confidence and self-assurance) of the time. The important thing is that the two alternative perspectives are interconnected.

Ironic sincerity and oscillation: Pendulum and double pendulum

One of the more playful figures of thought in metamodernism is the idea of ironic sincerity or, alternatively, "informed naivety". Put very simply, metamodern macro-diagnosis ascribes to modernity a "feeling" of hope, sincerity and enthusiasm. At some point during the 1990's, this *zeitgeist* broke and was replaced by postmodernity's relativist-nihilist cocktail of end-of-history ennui. Around 2010, metamodernism emerged, in Luke Turner's words, as "the resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, whilst not forfeiting all that we've learnt from postmodernism" (Turner, 2015).

The significance of ironic sincerity lies in the fact that metamodernists do not, after postmodernism's irony and nihilism, simply return to innocence and sincerity. Umberto Eco famously explained the postmodern attitude as one where a man in love with a very cultivated woman found himself unable to simply say "I love you madly" because he knew, and knew she knew – and she knew that he knew she knew – that this is the kind of expression romance writers like Barbara Cartland put to paper. The only way out in the age of lost innocence, Eco argued, lay in the typically postmodern stance of irony and pastiche, that is, in saying: "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly" (Eco, 1994:67–68).

The alternative metamodernism offers is to say it and mean it, right here and now, in this moment – while aware and conscious that there will be other moments when such a thing is indeed unsayable and un-meanable. Put very simply, metamodernists acknowledge that humans have existential "mood swings". As has been pointed out earlier, it is indeed the pendulum and its oscillation between two extreme amplitudes that is central to metamodernism. Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) observe, however, that the swings are not limited to irony and sincerity: "Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010:5,6).

It is tempting to leave it at that. But from the point of view of complexity theory, Vermeulen and van den Akker must be taken a step further. Eco's account already factored in reflexivity: the man knowing that the woman knows, and she knowing that he knows she knows. "Is he being sincere or ironic?" becomes "Is he thinking I'm sincere while I'm in fact ironic?" and its permutations. Thus, if one takes a step back and centres on the communication between the lovers as a system, one arrives not at a pendulum but at a *double pendulum*, that is, a pendulum attached to a pendulum.

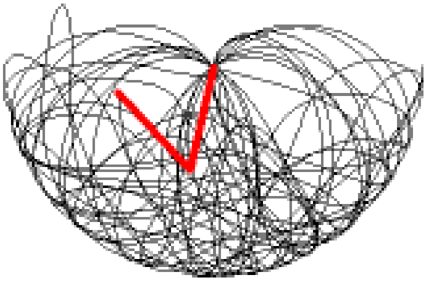

Figure 1: A double pendulum (Catslash, public domain)

The double pendulum, as illustrated in Figure 1, is a well-known figure in the mathematical study of chaos. The fundamental difference between a pendulum and a double pendulum is that the former's movements are regular, the latter's complex and chaotic.[6] Yet, the complexity of the double pendulum's "dance" emerges from the regularity of the single pendulum's swing and the initial conditions. Viewed in opposition to modernity, the swing of the pendulum illustrates why a shifting point of view is not necessarily incoherent, opportunistic or hypocritical. Or, alternatively expressed: incoherence, opportunism and hypocrisy are typically human. In contrast to the postmodern stance, this take reminds us that a seemingly arbitrary array of viewpoints might still be rule governed or at least bounded by realities.

Coexistence of indigenous, premodern, modern, postmodern cultural codes

Although authors do not always acknowledge it, metamodernism draws heavily on universal history in the style of Harari's *Sapiens*, Diamond's *Guns, Germs* and *Steel* and Wilson's *The Social Conquest of Earth*. One of the features that distinguishes metamodernism from its predecessors is that metamodernists do not tell a tale of overcoming, transcending or arriving, but of coping. In fact, Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) go so far as to locate the meaning of the meta- in metamodernism not in "overcoming" but in "moving" (deriving from Plato's metaxis indicating oscillatory movement between poles.) The problem, however, with *metaxic oscillation* that Abramson (2015b) points out, is that it "merely re-entrenches postmodern dialectics by convincing us that every problem is fundamentally bipolar". As mathematician and logician Chris Brink (2007) once remarked: "You cannot play a leading role in a complex situation if your choices are always limited to one of two". The problem with poles is that it implies binary opposites and linearity. It has thus become preferable to see things on a plane (thus multidimensionally) and not in a line, which is why we prefer the dance of the double pendulum.

It is perhaps instructive to briefly consider root metaphors. Put simply, modernity drew an arrow for humankind that pointed towards a bright future, perhaps slightly sterile and devoid of mysteries, but lit by progress. Nations that were not yet there fell into the category of "developing" countries, a term indicating that they, too, must leave the premodern squalor behind. The key figure for postmodernism, conversely, is perhaps the *ouroboros*, the snake that bites its own tail. Discourse goes on and on, according to postmodernists, and the only thing it really feeds on is previous discourse. Interestingly, the root metaphor of the indigenous cultural codes is also circular: nature's circle of seasons, birth and death. But for metamodernists neither the directed arrow nor the circular *ouroboros* capture the challenge we are currently facing. The metamodern metaphors are the oscillation of the pendulum and the "dance" of the double pendulum.

Although there is an element of "healing" in metamodernism, the key is not to leave modernity and postmodernity *behind* or to close one's eyes. Metamodernists accept that premodern, modern and postmodern cultural codes will always co-exist in society. Wilson (2012:7) diagnosed the malaise very graphically in *The Social Conquest of Earth* in 1996: "We have created a Star Wars civilization, with Stone Age emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike technology. We thrash about. We are terribly confused by the mere fact of our existence, and a danger to ourselves and to the rest of life".

For social scientists and scholars, the instinctive reaction to Wilson's diagnosis is *time to upgrade our institutions, then*. However, the medieval institutions are to a large degree the expressions of the Stone Age emotions: the biological fact that underpins the institution of blood feud, for example, is that humans care more for kin than non-kin – which is evolutionarily necessarily so. Thus, what humanity needs to cope with, in Giddens's words (1990), is not only the "juggernaut" of modernism, with its quantum computing, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence and killer drones. The problem is the figure perched atop the juggernaut: a rather clueless hunter-gatherer trying to appear in control, but de facto only clinging on.

As the figure of the double pendulum's "dance" indicates, dynamic, not static, balance is key. On a more concrete, less metaphorical level, metamodernists see clearly that premodern, modern and postmodern cultural codes have positive as well as negative impacts. However, metamodernism is not to be confused with a political new-age movement where one would naively celebrate indigenous and premodern knowledge as on par with modern science. We therefore agree with Freinacht's perhaps more conservative approach to metamodernism which strives to be humble given the magnitude of the task; by firstly oscillating between modernism and postmodernism and establishing this axis properly, before incorporating and reconstructing premodernism in ways that avoid "pathological or regressive expressions" (Görtz, 2024).

The more radical postmodernists maintained cultural relativism. They held that any tale or "narrative" is as good as any other; therefore, attempts to privilege one story as "better" or only "better supported by evidence" were simply exercises in power. The spirit of radical subjectivity led to a deference to indigenous and premodern traditions, which was perhaps commendable for tolerance but put horrible practices beyond rational criticism as well. For example, female genital mutilation is part of some cultures, as is cannibalism. Again, Wilson (1998:201) pinpointed the problem a good while ago, and in no uncertain terms: "…if ethical standards are molded by culture, and cultures are endlessly diverse and equivalent, what disqualifies theocracy, for example, or colonialism? Or child labor, torture, and slavery?"

Attuned to the realities of the prehistoric human as far as the best of our knowledge goes, metamodernists are aware that, despite heavy romanticising in the tradition of Rousseau, indigenous and premodern cultures are not only about living in harmony with nature (Gat, 2006). Moreover, if any tale is as good as any other, the talk of universal human rights – one of the key achievements of modernism – would become just another tale among others. A culture that espouses our neighbours as an inferior race whom we are entitled to enslave, would become, if truly and genuinely believed by the respective group, equivalent in value to the UN's loftiest goals. Insofar as cultural relativism leads to conclusions that even its proponents would not accept, it cannot be the answer.

Imagined communities, collective imaginaries, warts and all

Imagined communities and collective imaginaries hardly need introduction in strategic communication circles; they are central to theory and practice. The actual term "imagined communities" goes back to historian and political scientist Benedict Anderson who employed it to explore nationalism in the late 18th century (Anderson, 1991). The phrase "collective imaginary" or "social imaginary" goes back to the work of Charles Taylor (2003). Imagined communities and collective imaginaries capture, then, that the social world around us is socially constructed: social orders are not divinely instituted or results of the inexorable laws of history; collective efforts can bring about new and better orders.

With the phrase "imagined community" coined in 1983, one may ask on what grounds metamodernism claims originality. Social constructionism has been going strong for quite a while. What does the renewed talk about imagined communities and collective imaginaries offer that was not offered by Castoriadis, Berger & Luckmann or even Sartre?

The answer we would suggest is based on the earlier figures of thought but also goes slightly beyond the explicitly formulated position of metamodernists here. It is that metamodernism, more solidly grounded in an understanding of the human being as a species, offers a more realistic, "bounded" social constructionism not plagued by the inherent contradictions of radical relativism. It seems to us that postmodernity tried to make the straightforward social constructionism of the 1960s a bit more daring. Once everybody accepted that social institutions such as courts of law, monogamous heterosexual marriage, canons of classical literature or social classes (for instance, nobility) only exist as long as we believe in them, one had to go one step further. Postmodernists did so by subtly turning construction by collective belief into what we would call "imagination-constructionism". Imagination-constructionism, although its authors often carefully avoided saying it explicitly, suggested that many physical and material states are "constructions" as well. Seemingly "hard" scientific diagnoses such as "insanity" in Foucault's accounts and "schizophrenia" and "psychosis" in the work of existentialist psychiatrist Ronald D. Laing, were easy targets at the beginning. Deconstruction ran into trouble, however, when the scientific search for cause and effect proved successful in more and more areas (Wilson, 1998). In order to stay plausible, imagination-construction withdrew into avantgarde social theory, that is, the imagination of grand alternative schemes of society – in Foucault's famous phrase, *what could be otherwise?* (Huffer, 2013). At some point, postmodernists crossed the thin line between imagining alternative human conditions and imagining a different human altogether.

Believing vs imagining

What we sense in metamodernism, in contrast, is a much narrower, more demanding "belief-constructionism" that emerges from the question, *why is this so and not otherwise?* Both forms agree that social arrangements are socially constructed insofar as they require widely shared buy-in for them to become "real" – contrary to gravity which acts on mass independently of beliefs and imaginaries. Belief-constructionism, however, finds the "real" beliefs on which people actually act more interesting than avantgarde imaginations. To take an example: colonial rule, as opposed to gravity or brute-force, boots-on-the-ground occupation, only works when a majority of the colonised population either *believes* in the superiority of the coloniser's culture or acts *as if* they believe, be it out of fear or opportunism. Attempts to overcome colonial rule may begin with imagination, but the ability to imagine otherwise is not sufficient. What is required is the spreading of the genuine, future-oriented, non-hypothetical belief that affairs *can* be otherwise, *will* be otherwise. Admittedly, this requires someone daring enough to begin imagining. The problem with imagination-constructionism (and our critique does not apply to all postmodern authors equally here), is that it deproblematises the step from *imagining* something to genuinely believing it, that is, believing sufficiently to act on it. If you can imagine freedom from colonial rule, imagination-constructionists suggest, belief and consequently action are only a comparatively trivial step away.

Metamodernism does not deny the importance of imagination, to be sure. Lene Andersen (2019:37) makes this very clear:

> When historical circumstances such as war or famine challenge these deep values, and when economic prosperity makes old privileges meaningless and new technologies break down power structures; that is when artists start expressing new sentiments and ideas in new ways, and philosophy and science start imagining and exploring if things could be different.

What Andersen does not capture, and where strategic communication is far stronger and aware, is that art, philosophy and science tend to produce a pool of conflicting ideas, only a few of which prevail. For us, as belief-constructionists, there is a huge gulf between being able to imagine something on one side, and firm belief that supports willingness to act, take risks or perhaps even die, on the other. Although there is overlap in the cognitive apparatus involved, counterfactual or hypothetical imagination is not the same mental state as genuine belief that something is factual; one can imagine unicorns and be fully aware that they do not "really" exist. To anchor genuine belief, considerable effort over considerable periods of time as well as congruence with experienced facts is required. No amount of propaganda will convince citizens of the blessings of socialism when the shelves in the shops are empty. Just as it remains to be seen whether the Trump imaginaries will make America great again.

Nothing is as powerful as an idea communicated strategically and sustainedly

A closer look at the historic facts of any liberation movement, be it the African decolonisation of the 20th century or the French revolution of the 18th century, reveals one thing: that large parts of the liberated do not go through some spiritual transformation after which every decision is clear, every action unambiguous. If it appears so, it is because of retrospective myth construction. The majority of people do not suddenly see the light by way of "the 'unforced force' of rational argument", to use Habermas's famous expression (Habermas, 1996:306). In the beginning, the majority almost always is dragged along a path which is by no means self-evident, and sometimes brutally prodded along the way. At the moment of victory, liberation movements all too often have to drag the enraged populus in the opposite direction, away from the chaos of mob rule that has very little to do with the beautiful collective imaginary.

Acting as if

Yet again, even the insight that ideas are made powerful by sustained, painful and often violent efforts, does not capture the complexity. At the tip of the one pendulum, metaphorically speaking, sits another.

One must still make allowances for the average, tragically savvy member of the species. While humans are capable of the most noble acts of altruism, they are also well capable of opportunism and dissembling. The historical record suggests very strongly that the ones that do the dragging and prodding, are not necessarily the ones that believe most genuinely. In witch-hunts, pogroms and genocides, one almost always sees opportunists who settle personal scores with neighbours and enrich themselves. (For a thorough investigation of the Rwandan genocide see, for example, Prunier 2009.) Instead of trying to imagine away these unsavoury human traits, strategic communication should rather investigate under what circumstances it happens and, perhaps even more importantly, under what circumstances it does not.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION REIMAGINED

Our metamodern take on the field results from decades of grappling with the subjective impression that something is not yet in place with strategic communication as an academic discipline. We arrived at this observation independently of each other on different hemispheres of the planet. Despite moving in very different circles, the impression we gained in countless conversations with colleagues from inside and outside our field converged very clearly nevertheless: something is "off".

Our suggestion here is that the discipline appears "off" precisely because of an undigested problem: the coexistence of modern and postmodern streams. The problem of strategic communication is that it has been trying to fit the modern as well as the postmodern mould – anyone's mould, really. Metamodern thought makes us aware that instead of aiming for half-baked compromises, we should rather break the mould and ask whether we are looking for answers in the right place.

If strategic communication is pervaded by metamodern thought already, committing to a metamodern perspective should be not so much about adopting new, hitherto unimaginable figures of thought. The key point is to *apply* the metamodern perspective – commitment to the complexity of the species, both–and thinking, ironic sincerity, double-pendulum oscillation – to come to an acceptance that the discipline is made by the *dynamic interplay* of seemingly incompatible ideas and concepts. There are many areas of dynamic interplay that warrant further exploration here, of course. However, utilising the five areas of interest in the third section, we concentrate on major points. To challenge strategic communication theorists, five questions will be asked, following which some answers will be ventured.

Take reality seriously: reality and "reality"

Our first question: What if we developed an epistemology–ontology nexus that reflects the objectivity of the world as well as the subjectivity of human life? Not a compromise between the poles of constructionism and realism, to be sure, but a multidimensional framework that captures why the social world is obviously socially constructed, yet again obviously not arbitrarily so; why quantitative as well as qualitative research has its place, yet obviously do different things.[7]

The postmodern spirit has left the field in confusion about the "constructedness" of reality, with strawmen being erected on both sides. While the insight that institutions such as colonial rule are not God-given may have been eye-opening to some at some time, not even hardcore positivists today would doubt the social construction of social institutions in principle (it is just that they prefer to research something else). That the rule of a certain class is socially constructed in principle does not mean that it can be deconstructed at will, by any given actor, at any time, simply by disbelieving. To humanity's great misfortune, this applies even where the majority does not genuinely believe but act "as if". As has been argued by various authors, enduring social arrangements are evolutionary stable strategies (Seiffert-Brockmann, 2018); they might not be the best arrangements, but they prevail as long as there is not a critical mass that subjectively perceives an incentive to be the first to step out of line.

Deconstruction, we have argued, rests on imagining alternative realities which, despite overlaps in the cognitive apparatus involved, is a far cry from believing and having others believe. Foucault's famous question was: *What could be otherwise?* For us, strategic communication seems ideally suited to inquire into an alternative question: *Why is this so and not otherwise?* To do so, however, strategic communication research must go beyond the suggestion that society is the product of arbitrary, self-referential discourses predicated on the assumption that the human being is infinitely malleable. While discourses sometimes do follow their own logic – and more often than not follow the logic of the powerful – there is also a logic of adapting communities and collectives to changing circumstances (Nothhaft & Seiffert-Brockmann, 2023). Some social institutions are universal, others common (polygynous marriage), yet again others rare (polyandrous marriage). All known human societies have funeral rites, for example (Brown, 2004). They might be very different from culture to culture but there is clearly a material level of humans dying, relatives grieving and an implicit knowledge that safe disposal of corpses prevents infectious diseases.

Take the human being seriously I

Our next question: What if strategic communication research took the complexity of the homo sapiens seriously? Again, we sense this is reflected in the argument that qualitative researchers make against statistically sophisticated, yet psychologically trivial, quantitative research. Does it really make sense to confront respondents with questions about matters they never gave a thought to before being asked?

The curious thing about the discourse in large swathes of our discipline is the disconnect. On the one hand, we insist that the human is highly complex, in principle. On the other, we sometimes underpin our research with conceptualisations that are under-complex compared to the mental machinations of a nine-year old trying to talk mum into buying candy. Despite the occasional lip service to the affective turn, strategic communication frequently remains pervaded by a clinical sterility that conceptualises "stakeholders" and their "issues". Lest we forget, stakeholders and humans are not the same animal. Stakeholders resemble humans outwardly, but their inner workings appear to be more related to the simpler, more manageable *homo economicus*. At the same time, *Homo sapiens* is not unfathomable either. Cognitive science is puzzling together an increasingly sophisticated understanding of humanity's curious dual nature of an individualistic as well as a collective species. But what we have learnt suggests very strongly that stakeholder theory has to up its game.

Take the human being seriously II: The good, the bad and the human

Stakeholder theory is an analytical tool, of course, and for the purposes of plotting a course of action, simplifications are necessary. What worries us is when analytical simplifications are compounded by ideological ones that reintroduce fairy-tale dualistic archetypes – in Storm's words, "theory that is merely jargon overlaid on predetermined political judgments" (Storm, 2021:6). What has become quite typical is the binary ideological assumption that stakeholders come in a good and a bad variety. The ostensibly powerless and marginalised ones are good; the ostensibly powerful and privileged ones are bad. Stakeholders of the good kind are always innocent victims, their beliefs always genuine. They never lie or dissemble, never opportunistically misunderstand or take "strategic umbrage". Stakeholders of the bad kind, conversely, are always crooks. They always lie. They can never be trusted.

Humans apparently find the duality of good vs evil comforting, but comfort is not a good basis for analytical methodology. What we have learnt from the 20th century is that under certain circumstances, horrible atrocities can be committed by well-meaning, decent people, that is, people who are not psychopathic or sociopathic, *could* have seen the evil of their ways, but did not – or acted as if they had not.

The authors belong to those who, in Storm's words, "wish that more scholars in the humanities and social sciences chose theories based on empirical adequacy instead of prior ideological commitments" (Storm, 2021:6). Although it happens horrifyingly often that truly innocent minorities are scapegoated in gruesome ways by majorities, there are many other cases where a closer look reveals the clean-cut good vs bad as a convenient construction. The mutually perpetuating forces of Yin and Yang depicting good in bad and bad in good are far more real in humanity. Moreover, the seemingly powerless are as prone to lying and dissembling as the powerful. Why should they not? It might matter less and be more forgivable, but it remains that the everyday struggle for existence normally makes people wilier and more opportunistic, "smarter" in a necessarily short-sighted, individualistic way. Yet again, sometimes one has to ask whether parties posing as the powerless, be it on the left or the right, are indeed as downtrodden as they wish to appear. At times, the ostensibly oppressed are surprisingly effective and "strategic" in elevating their predicaments higher on the agenda.

Take the human being seriously III: A species adapting like everyone else

From a metamodern point of view, one can readily concede that imaginaries may look like seemingly arbitrary results of seemingly self-referential discourse; no-one doubts creative minds could easily imagine alternative states of affair. All of this holds only on the proximate level, however. On the ultimate level, discourses in society and the imaginaries that result from these discourses are responses to environmental challenges (Nothhaft & Seiffert-Brockmann, 2023). These environmental challenges are – at least here and now, at a given point in time – realities. They can be communicatively reconstructed in this or that way. One can close one's eyes to them, but they will reassert themselves anyway.

One could argue that our account is plausible as long as the realities we insist on are physical realities. Say water gets scarce and a region that supported two tribes in coexistence now only supports one – a development we de facto see on global scope due to climate change. If there is no way to move away and access alternative sources, war between the two tribes is inevitable: war rhetoric will follow, and each tribe's spiritual leaders will inevitably point out how despicable and degenerate the other is. But even here, deconstructivists could hold, the underlying problem is not physical reality. It lies in socially constructed reality: in categories of "tribe", of "them vs us". Surely, with a little goodwill and imagination, one could find ways of sharing increasingly scarce resources?

The point here is to admit that such a solution is highly unlikely while acknowledging at the same time that it is not, in principle, impossible. This is where metamodernism's trait of collaboration becomes relevant. Metamodernism encourages not only dialogue but collaboration. As Abramson (2015a) points out: "In a world in which we are constantly being influenced by innumerable forces….metamodernism literalizes this experience by encouraging us to consciously join our efforts and perspectives with those of others". Pipere and Martinsone (2022) apply metamodernist principles and the ontological metamodern principle of paradoxical simultaneity to the social sciences to showcase how meta crises and complex problems can be overcome through collaborative transdisciplinary approaches. Simultaneity refers to the idea that the metamodernist does not move between paradoxical positions but, in fact, can inhabit all of them at once (Abramson 2015a). Embracing both dialogue and dialectics, even between differing parties, with collaboration as the ultimate goal, is a metamodern characteristic.

Take complexity seriously: Non-linear methodology

We argued earlier that there is no lack of acknowledgement of complexity on the problem side. What is missing, we sense, is an adequate understanding of complexity on the solution side. Storm contends that postmodernism, despite its relativism, was driven by a "lingering longing for certainties" (Storm, 2021:6) And he has a point: as long as one entertains imagination-constructionism, *wicked problems* (Hassenstein et al., 2022) – problems from which no escape seems to exist – appear not nearly as wicked. From a purely relativistic point of view, even the most intractable political conflict is always self-chosen; the removed scholarly observer remains secure in his or her knowledge that to *think differently* is always the solution. Similarly, some of our strategic communication colleagues seem convinced that the solution to each and every problem lies in communication.

This binary perspective exacerbates the problem because it ignores the complex interplays between process and content. Metamodernism, in contrast, is aware that humans, in Schopenhauer's words, can *do* what they want, but cannot want what they want. To take a relevant contemporary example: in 1903, the Jewish diaspora was offered settlement in Uganda and Kenya instead of Palestine. It is not surprising that the 7th Zionist Congress rejected the British offer despite painful (and correct) predictions that settlers in Palestine were in for a century of conflict. The dispersed Jews considered Palestine their ancestral land, they could not be brought to build a new state of Israel in Africa. In that sense, the choice did exist and did not exist at the same time.

At the same time, the years 1903 to 1905, when the offer was made, was perhaps the closest the issue came to an alternative solution. The important point here is non-linearity and emergence. Although the trajectory of affairs is often more set than it seems and there is by no means always a communicative solution, the unpredictable, chaotic "dance" of the double pendulum, metaphorically speaking, will inevitably offer *bifurcation points* (Nothhaft & Wehmeier, 2007). There are moments when the double pendulum stands still at the very top and might fall to the left or right. Similarly, bifurcation points are moments in time – opportunities, chances – where things might get on a completely different track, where interventions might be successful, where new solutions emerge.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

It can well be asked what the implications of all these challenges are for strategic communication. In a future publication, we hope to spell out more concretely and practically what a metamodern turn in strategic communication could look like on the meso-level of practice and research. To open the floor, we offer the following preliminary answers:

Begin to oscillate but accept that the movement will more likely become a "dance"

It is time that we begin to see things on a plane and not on a line – where our options are not always limited to one of two. And where we accept the existence of complexity, contradictions (of both–and) as a starting point. Where things are not black or white, but black and white and many shades in between. Where stakeholders are not good *or* bad but good *and* bad *and* human. Where we accept that in the workplace, collaboration can (and obviously does) co-exist with competition, diversity with excellence, accountability with freedom, and effect with affect. Where we can deconstruct as well as reconstruct, and where we embrace dialectics as well as dialogue.

Oscillate between a realist epistemology and a constructionist epistemology

Without a realist epistemology, without the ability to say "this is how things are here and now", differentiation between good and bad strategy becomes meaningless, and no stable patterns can be developed. Without a constructionist epistemology, it is hard to see how the higher functions of strategic communication, such as brand and identity-building, could be construed.

Nurture interdisciplinary relationships, instead of drawing disciplinary boundaries

Given the juggernaut humanity must cope with, disciplinary fluidities have become unavoidable, and the blurring of communication genres has truly arrived (for example, between media and communication). Endless paradigm wars – what Tomaselli (2018:295) calls "epistemological schizophrenia" – can no longer be tolerated, unless we wish to sink into oblivion. No longer can we devote our loyalty only to the discipline. We owe it to the greater crises science in society faces. As Freinacht (2023) shrewdly observes, humans are "wholeparts". The figure perched on top of the juggernaut can do with some help. We need to collaborate, and to consciously join our efforts and perspectives with those of others through inter- and transdisciplinary approaches.

Find a new strategic communication discourse

A new discourse is one that acknowledges oscillation between and beyond and is, ultimately, the dance of the double pendulum. It is the discourse of "both–and", which steers clear of binary traps or linear compromises. A discourse in which we also ask ourselves the following questions:

- How are things here and now?
- How do we want things to be?
- How do/can we respond?
- With whom do/can we collaborate?
- And, what evidence can we bring?

Closer conceptual and methodological collaboration across various disciplines is needed, and we must not let one preferred methodology dominate

We need to oscillate between both unique interpretations – too often "obscured by the discourse of emergence" (Nothhaft et al. 2018) – and the search for stable patterns. To that end, if we want to bring something to the table that others can tap into, we need research in height *and* breadth *and* depth. It remains the optimal way in which a unifying, well-respected strategic communication theory can be bolstered, also to the advantage of the applied communication disciplines.

In recent years, postmodernist researchers in strategic communication openly expressed their preference for qualitative research without which "no rich description…of complex interrelationships" is possible (Verwey & Benecke, 2021:24). We remain wary of such strong preferences, as excluding the one for the other encourages more epistemological polarities, which in a metamodern context is neither desirable nor necessary. While rich descriptions of the unique are needed, explanatory power is needed as well. Concepts must not only be thrown in the ring, "soon to wink out in the dimensionless dark", but need to be operationalised, refined and built upon – preferably with replicability. Science is a search for stable patterns among seemingly unique phenomena. To that end, ongoing measurement and evaluation through robust quantitative (cause-and-effect) methods, qualitative (interpretive) research, and mixed methods, including valid measuring instruments and databases, should be encouraged.

In a way, an oscillation between modern and postmodern communication research tools can, in itself, be regarded as "strategic". Corporate environments tend to prefer quantitative (or modernist) frameworks, while social change efforts may rely more on postmodern values. Metamodernists are not "allergic" to either modern or postmodern ways of communicating and research. Encouraging students to learn from both science and humanities – both hugely in demand on the labour market – may be the way forward.[8] It thus stands to reason that methodology preferences and priorities are dictated not only by solid underlying theory but also by context, as long as the decisions taken based on the findings also remain contextual and provisional. The Titanic did sink because of a gash in her hull. The tale of the Titanic is also a tale of hubris.

Become agile enough to live with complexity and to cope with perpetual organisational upheaval

Conventional readings of strategic communication's perhaps most widely-used definition, by Hallahan et al. (2007), tend to interpret the keyword "purposeful" as "underpinned by a mission" – with the mission conceived as rather static, such as "move from A to B". McKinsey (2024) may not be the favourite wellspring of wisdom for progressives, but even the most technocratic management consultancy has departed from linear thinking and offers a reinterpretation of "purposeful" in one of their key take-aways from Davos 2024: "In our complex systems and in this complex era, solutions are rarely straightforward. Instead of telling your team to move from point A to point B, join them in a journey toward a general direction. Lead yourself, and your team, with purposeful vision, not just objectives".

CONCLUSION

The South African scholar Mamphela Ramphele famously remarked: "We cannot control, or even completely figure out, the complex systems of the world, but we can dance with them."[9] We have tried to sketch, thus, where and how strategic communication needs to learn to dance.

Having been realistic to the point of cynicism, we are perhaps, in conclusion, granted a moment of dreamy-eyed imagination. In our strange new world, strategic communication graduates face a seemingly paradoxical situation. With one foot in the modern world, they are taught about *authentic* brands, how to implement a *genuine* CSR-strategy, how to stimulate *real* dialogue. With the other foot in the critical postmodern world, they are told that corporate talk of authenticity, genuine engagement or meaningful dialogue is inevitably "bullshit". Puzzled, some students want to know who is right and who is wrong. Others, equally puzzled, quickly arrive at the conclusion that there is no truth. A metamodern stance might help to realise that the solution does not lie in such simplifications. Our vision for strategic communication, then, would be that the discipline substantially adds to our understanding of the contradictory, incoherent human being as it is and goes about its life. Our hope is that this understanding will be used for the purpose of identifying chances and opportunities, for creating a more peaceful, sustainable and fun world. It seems clear to us that we need to let go, embrace what we don't know and radically reframe our questions.

One of which can be to ask ourselves what the "strategic" in strategic communication means.

1 Our thanks go to Alessandra Sossini, PhD student at Lund University, for pointing this out.

2 For example, Meyer and Barker (2020:59-60) and Meyer (2021:16) argue that a metamodern approach is the most agile and feasible approach to deal with the intricacies of the current reality riddled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA).

3 Hanzi Freinacht ostensibly is a political philosopher, historian and sociologist who spends most of his time in quiet contemplation in the Swiss Alps. In reality, it is the penname used by author sociologists Daniel Görtz and Emil Ejner Friis.

4 Andersen, as has been noted, renamed her book Metamodernity: Meaning and Hope in a Complex World (2019) to Polymodernity: Meaning and Hope in a Complex World (2023).

5 Taken together, Overton-de Klerk & Verwey (2013) and Overton-de Klerk (2023) offer a comprehensive overview.

6 Credit for pointing this out to us goes to mathematician and logician Chris Brink with gratitude.

7 Critical realism, by and large connected to the work of Roy Bhaskar, would be a good starting point here.

8 Credit goes to Daniel Görtz for pointing this out.

9 See the discussion on transdisciplinarity and Radical Reason in Ramphele et al., 2022:20.

REFERENCES

Abramson, S. (2015)a. *Ten basic principles of metamodernism*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ten-key-principles-in-met_b_7143202

Abramson, S. (2015)b. *Five more principles of metamodernism*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/five-more-basic-principle_b_7269446

Adyahanzi and Dempsey, B.G. (2022). *Emergentism: A religion for the metamodern world*. Ontario: Palimpsest Press.

Andersen, L.R. (2019). *Metamodernity. Meaning and hope in a complex world*. .Copenhagen: Nordic Bildung.

Andersen, L.R. (2023). *Polymodernity. Meaning and hope in a complex world*. Copenhagen: Nordic Bildung.

Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso.

Barker, C.D., Dempsey, B.G., Hedlund, N., Esbjörn-Hargens, S., Ranefors, J., Poledna, P., Kleineberg, M., Alderman, B., Henriques, G. & Leider-Wiley, S. (2023–2024). *Foundations of archdisciplinarity – Advancing beyond the meta*. Minnesota: Archdisciplinary Research Centre.

Bisel, R.S. (2010). A communicative ontology of organization? A description, history, and critique of CCO theories for organization science. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 24(1):124–131.

Brink, C. (2007). *Anatomy of a Transformer*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press.

Brink, C. (2024). Personal correspondence, 2 and 8 February 2024.

Brown, D.E. (2004). Human universals, human nature & human culture. *Daedalus*, 133(4):47–54.

Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the network society* (The information age: Economy, society and culture, Volume I). Oxford: Blackwell.

Castells, M. (1997). *The power of identity* (The information age: Economy, society and culture, Volume II). Oxford: Blackwell.

Castells, M. (1998). *End of millennium* (The information age: Economy, society and culture, Volume III). Oxford: Blackwell.

Clarke, S. 2006. *From enlightenment to risk. Social theory and contemporary society*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Cooren, F., Kuhn, T.R., Cornelissen, J P. & Clark, T. (2011). Communication, organizing and organization: An overview and introduction to the special issue. *Organization Studies*, 32(9):1149-1170.

Diamond, J. (2017 [1997]). *Guns, germs and steel: The fate of human societies. 20th Anniversary Edition*. London: W.W. Norton.

Dühring, L. (2015). Lost in translation? On the disciplinary status of public relations. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 4(1):5–23.

Eco, U. (1994). Reflections on The Name of the Rose. trans. William Weaver, London: Minerva, p. 67–68.

Ferguson, M.A. (2018). Building theory in public relations: Interorganizational relationships as a public relations paradigm. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 30(4):164–178.

Freinacht, H. (2017). *The Listening Society*. Metamoderna.

Freinacht, H. (2019). *Nordic Ideology*. Metamoderna.

Freinacht, H. (2022). *12 Commandments: For extraordinary people to master ordinary life*. Metamoderna.

Freinacht, H. (2023). 5 Things that make you Metamodern. *medium.com*.

Freinacht, H. (2024). An open invitation to a metamodern sociology. Metamoderna

Gat, A. (2006). *War in human civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity/Blackwell.

Görtz, D. (2024). Personal correspondence. 13 October 2024.

Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms. Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Translated by William Rehg. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, B., van Ruler,B., Verčič, D. & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, (1):3–35.

Harari, Y.N. (2011). *Sapiens. A brief history of humankind*. [Kindle Edition]. London: Penguin.

Harari, Y.N. (2017). *Homo Deus: A brief history of tomorrow* [Kindle Edition]. New York, London, Sydney, etc.: HarperCollins.

Hassenstein, K., Ritz, C. and Sandhu, S. (2022). *Wicked problems. Herausforderung für PR und organisationskommunikation*. Wiesbaden, Germany:SpringerVS.

Holtzhausen, D.R. & Voto, R. (2002). Resistance from the margins: The postmodern public relations practitioner as organizational activist. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 14(1): 57–84. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1401_3

Holtzhausen, D.R. (2012). *Public relations as activism. Postmodern approaches to theory and practice*. New York: Routledge.

Huffer, L. (2013). Foucault: What could be otherwise. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21–23.

Irvine, M. (2014). Approaches to Pro-Mo. http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/pomo.html

Jerath, K.S. (2021). Modernity and modernism. In *Science, technology and modernity*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80465-7_3

Latour, B. (1991). *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes. Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*. Paris: La Découverte.

McKinsey. (2024). 10 Key take-aways from Davos. https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/themes/10-key-takeaways-from-davos-2024

Meyer, I. & Barker, R. (2020). A metamodern model for managing stakeholder relationships in non-profit organisations. *Communicare*, 39(1):56–70.

Meyer, I. (2021). The resurrection of modernistic public relations – a metamodern perspective. *Journal for Communication Studies*, 14,1(27):15–36.

Nothhaft, H. & Seiffert-Brockmann, J. (2023). Peacocks, penknives and power: On the implications of evolutionary psychology for strategic communication. I*nternational Journal of Strategic Communicatio*n 17(3):163–180.

Nothhaft, H. & Wehmeier, S. (2007). Coping with complexity: Sociocybernetics as a framework for communication management. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(1):151–168.

Nothhaft, H. & Zerfass, A. (2023). Public relations in a postdisciplinary world: On the possibility of establishing a constitutive theory within the tribal struggles of communication disciplines. In C.H. Botan & E.J. Sommerfeldt (eds). *Public relations III: In the age of publics*. London, New York: Routledge.

Nothhaft, H., Werder, K.P., Vercic, D. & Zerfass, A. (2018). Strategic communication: Reflections on an elusive concept. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4):352–366.

Overton-de Klerk, N. & Verwey, S. (2013). Towards an emerging paradigm of strategic communication: Core driving forces. Communicatio, 39(3):362–382.

Overton-de Klerk, N. (2023). Reflections on the current state and future of strategic communication as paradigm and practice. *Communicare*, 42(1):4–21.

Peters, J.D. (1986). Institutional sources of intellectual poverty in communication research. *Communication Research*, 13(4):527–559.

Pinker, S. (2003). The blank slate: *The modern denial of human nature*. [Kindle Edition]. New York: Penguin.

Pluckrose, H. & Lindsay, J. (2020). *Cynical theories: How activist scholarship made everything about race, gender, and identity—and why this harms everybody*. Durham, NC:

Pitchstone Publishing.
Prunier, G. (2009). *Africa's world war. Congo, the Rwandan genocide, and the making of a continental catastrophe*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
Ramphele, M. Vogel, C. & Reddy, D. (2022). Special SFSA plenary debate; the future of transdisciplinarity; how do we relearn to be human in new ways. *South African Journal of Science*, 18(Special Issue: Radical Reason):20–23.
Redhead, S. (2011). *We have never been postmodern: Theory at the speed of light*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Schoeneborn, D. & Vasquez, C. (2017). Communication as constitutive of organization. In C. R. Scott & L. K. Lewis (eds). *International encyclopedia of organizational communication*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
Seiffert-Brockmann. J. (2018). Evolutionary psychology: A framework for strategic communication research. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4):417–432, DOI: 10.1080/1553118X.2018.1490291
Sokal, A. (2010). *Beyond the Hoax*. [Kindle Edition]. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Storm, J.Ā.J. (2021). *Metamodernism: The future of theory*. [Kindle Edition]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Taylor, C. (2003). *Modern social imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Tomaselli, K. (2018). Science vs. constructivism: Creating or finding reality. In K. Tomaselli. (ed.). *Making sense of research*. eBook. Pretoria: Van Schaik, 290–315.
Turner, L. (2015). Metamodernism: A brief introduction. Notes on *Metamodernity*, blog 12 January 2015.
Vermeulen, T. & van den Akker, R. (2010). Notes on metamodernism. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2(1):5677.
Verwey, S. & Benecke, D.R. (2021). Paradigms, perspectives and paradoxes. In S. Verwey, D.R. Benecke & T. Phumo (eds). *Strategic Communication. South African Perspectives*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 5–32.
Wilson, E. (2012). *The social conquest of earth*. [Kindle Edition]. New York: Liveright.
Wilson, E.O. (1998). *Consilience. The unity of knowledge*. New York: Vintage.
Zerfass, A. (1996). Unternehmensführung und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit. Grundlegung einer Theorie der Unternehmenskommunikation und Public Relations. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Strategic Communication Futures: Paradigm and Practice in a Polycrisis World

AUTHOR(S)
Keyan G. Tomaselli
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2995-0726
Addamms Mututa
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7484-4335

PUBLISHED ONLINE
Volume 44 (1) May 2025
Pages 24-35
Submitted October 2024
Accepted March 2025

DOI
10.36615/b13my978

ISSN
Online 2957-7950
Print 0259-0069

Abstract
This article responds to Nina Overton-de Klerk's intervention that offers a critical and transdisciplinary overview of the current state of the discipline of strategic communication, and of its future potentials. Our critical engagement originates within the context of Overton-de Klerk's intervention, published in the contemporary conjuncture of polycrisis. Our self-reflexive study examines the significance of the discipline in relation to the social and political economic concerns of the broader cultural and media studies paradigm. The interlinkages between these fields/disciplines are examined in interdisciplinary nodal relations rather than as separated modular conceptual units. The issue of disciplinary identity is then discussed within the contemporary South African research context. A key argument is that knowledge of the history of paradigms is necessary to make appropriate methodological choices in relation to the researcher's own position within the contending paradigms. Some suggestions are offered for the way ahead that involve transdisciplinary approaches rather than modular epistemological separations.

Keywords
Communication, critical management studies, cultural and media studies, disciplinary imagination, researcher position

INTRODUCTION
Nina Overton-de Klerk's (2023) wide-ranging overview reflects on the current state and future of the paradigm and practice of strategic communication. Her timely intervention is provocative towards new terrains in which strategic communication is taking place, with pragmatic recommendations offered. The outright takeaway from Overton-de Klerk's work is that the lexical understanding of strategic communication as a steady state cybernetic is now challenged by recent changes in global scenarios. These changes necessitate a shift from the demure process of communication to a more proactive stance readied for a world of dynamic crisis that includes destructive phenomena such as unpredictable climate change. This is a world in which the object of communication is no longer clear. More innovative approaches to rethinking strategic communication are needed that can account for global multipolarity and cultural plurality.

We thus read Overton-de Klerk's paper as a keen introspection of, first, the new norms of sensemaking occasioned by new global realities and, second, as an urgent call to action for a new concept of such sensemaking. Overton-de Klerk's insights in this direction demonstrate a keen commitment to embracing the urgent yet overdue task of rethinking strategic communication, where the most pressing issue is not merely the crises in which such communication occurs but in reassessing the resulting interrelationships. It is for this reason that we join this effort in the spirit of professional collegiality from a cultural and media studies perspective. We re-assess the interrelationship between academia and its management, aiming to recuperate publication as a dialogue between scholars and policymakers and rescue our work from being administratively marginalised as mere 'productivity units'.

The common good is indicated in Overton-de Klerk's subsequent writings, but especially in *The Human Bridge: Racial Healing in South Africa* (Fuhr & De Klerk, 2024). In this work, the two authors demonstrate a new way of thinking about the post-apartheid crisis, one hinged on human consciousness as a vehicle towards post-racial nationhood. They also relocate the focus of communication from legislative and political processes initially prioritised post-1990s to cognitive-leaning self-motivated communication. Here is where the messages and their meanings – including behavioural change that allows for a less race-conscious post-apartheid South Africa – are relegated to the individual citizens nostalgically recalling the United Democratic Front's bygone days of non-racialism.

Thus, studying these works in relation to the authors' rapidly changing perspectives in communication studies casts a critical light on the paradigms that were in contestation globally and locally during the 1980s and 1990s. Their dialectical engagement within and between epistemological histories is key to their conceptual progress, which is evident in Overton-de Klerk's (2023) self-reflexive overview of strategic communication studies as it develops beyond the earlier narrow, functionalist and now outdated frame of public relations in South Africa.

The new scope contemplated by Overton-de Klerk, which has motivated our engagement in this article, is characterised by combinatorial rather than exclusionary thinking. The epistemological leap anticipated in new scoping can be extended conceptually towards contemporary global trends now at the forefront of reactive policies worldwide. Strategic communication of the future arises from networked global chaos: the aftermath of mass immigration to Europe and the USA, elusive protectionist economic policies, geo-political intimations of an intensely fragmentary world, and the rise of individual agency in government communication – as is the case with the X platform founder's very recent central role in US global communication policy and sectional corporate state dominance. The new strategic communication paradigm is thus tasked to be proactive against such eventualities in global information flow and the associated influences on communication practices. Likewise, the communication paradigm is now playing catch up with these unpredictable scenarios.

HYBRIDISATION

One of the foci of the Overton-de Klerk analysis relates to the work of Sonja Verwey. Verwey's talent was to hybridise her conceptual orbit, like bringing Michel Foucault into her analysis of strategic communication models, much as did the Australian affirmative application of Foucault's concept of governmentality (see Burchill et al., 1991) with regard to cultural policy research. This Foucauldian Australian policy paradigm was adopted in the mid-1990s in South Africa by the newly established Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (see Tomaselli, 2021). These adaptions, one of them read through the Freedom Charter and published in both English and Afrikaans as the official statement of an official conference on monuments, were an unexpected breakthrough at the time (Coetzee and van der Waal, 1988:489–501).

Hybridisation is also evident in the work of Dalien René Benecke and Sonja Verwey (2020) who draw in key scholars from within the broader cultural and media studies community, such as the humanistically inclined but diverse post-Marxist political economists Ernesto Laclau and Chantelle Mouffe (1985), whose agonistic framework acknowledged conflict as a positive force for social change. Also cited is Jurgen Habermas's (1991) argument that involuntary exposure to dissident ideas can contribute to discourses within public spheres. They also reference Nick Couldry et al.'s (2014) theory of the social aspects of digital infrastructures. While such hybridisation has an inherent risk, that is, the danger of half-baked compromises, Nothhaft and Overton-de Klerk (2025) discuss this problem in strategic communication. The Overton-de Klerk article thus draws on media studies while charting the commonalities, differences and contradictions between these contending and similar paradigms. Similarly, in compiling and editing

Making Sense of Research, Tomaselli (2018) offers an interdisciplinary understanding hailing both strategic communication and cultural and media scholars, showing where their respective preferred paradigms fit in, and how the very different disciplines, often in mortal epistemological combat, interact with, elaborate on and/or ignore each other. Such studies arise from the different and same historical conjunctures, paradigmatic trajectories and histories. These tensions always sit very uneasily – but potentially productively – in academic environments. The paradigmatic synergies can also deliver inter-, trans- and multi-disciplinary traction, as is argued below.

We can start with cultural studies and Marxist communication studies, where strategic communication was seen to be an adjunct to what was known in the 1980s as administrative research, doing the work of capital in an antagonistic relation to the working and subaltern classes. For this critique, accounting was the study of money as power, power relations and power flows. Although at the micro level, of course, balancing a firm's books was the mandated technical professional objective. It was cultural and media studies that critically examined relations and modes of production, and its accounting practices, with a view to enabling their democratisation (see Lehman and Moore, 1992). Yet, 30 years later, in January 2021, 16 academics were targeted for redundancy by the University of Leicester School of Business because they had published articles in *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, a journal launched by Hofstra University in 1990 where Lehman and Moore then worked. The Head of the College of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities (a sociologist) stated that management research should not be informed by a sociological perspective. The journal editors issued a rejoinder protesting this as a risk to academic freedom.[1]

Comparably, accounting in the Soviet Union was a tightly controlled, centralised information-gathering state surveillance function geared to ensuring collectivist distributive compliance (Diakonoff, 1929). The move to defer accounting to the government while tapping into its process for governance and control is noteworthy, for it maintains the illusion of independence while advancing underhand control mechanisms. Diakonoff (1929:32) describes this scenario:

> There is little left to the accountant's imagination and understanding. Practically everything is predetermined and prescribed in the exhaustive instructions of controlling centers. He is told how to construct his balance-sheet, and even the correlation of accounts is being established in such a way as to preclude incorrect posting and errors in describing operations.

British cultural studies during the 1970s had evolved to questioning the anti-humanist, anti-democratic and compliance-led utterly repressive Stalinist state (see Connell & Hilton, 2016; Hall, 1980; Johnson, 1979). In this communist economy, low levels of bookkeeping mechanisation (Campbell, 1958) and perverse factory incentives resulted in inflation of statistics that masked systemic underproduction across all sectors. Soviet accountants tended to fudge the errors of incompetent planners whose work plan quotas rarely matched the needs of consumers and citizens (Diakonoff, 1929:33).[2] Of course, this also occurs with capitalism, a recent example being Boeing's elevated short-term shareholder value at the expense of necessary factory quality control and passenger and crew safety with regard to its accident-prone 737-800 Max (George, 2024).

The critical management studies approach draws on similar historical materialist readings as did early cultural and media studies (see Goldman, 2021). Geoff Goldman's 2023 inaugural address on management studies and academic roaming, written in autoethnographic vein, for example, mentions Overton-de Klerk's work as one of his reference points. The Goldman Inaugural was contextualised in its journal of publication with two traumatic self-reflexive commentaries on the Middle East conflict, authored by a South African Israeli (Bethlehem, 2002) and a Palestinian (Jayyusi, 2002), in the *Critical Arts* Rapid Communication section. While Goldman does not mention the war, his lecture offers a prescient framework for considering management issues within these wider currents of contesting power blocs that are powered by various fractions of capital (whether legitimate or illegitimate, capitalist or socialist, familial or theocratic). His lecture draws attention to the issue of researcher position and subjectivity in the relations that are being studied. He thus writes about how he roamed, found, but lacked fit with prevailing and dominant management theory. He later – with great relief – discovered that he did fit with the critical version, in which he is now a leading South African scholar.

Historically, strategic communication studies were the methodological backbone of South African Communication Association (Sacomm) conferences, now also complemented with the new frameworks devised by the Stellenbosch University South African Research Chair in Science Communication that, in its second cycle, focuses on communication for social justice. This Chair draws much more on cultural and media studies in mediating between the scientific and the popular issues-driven research that connects science and society. The Chair's first cycle (2015–2021) involved Science Communication Theory and Science Communication Practice. The project explored perceptions of theoretical, conceptual and methodological issues as impacted by public discourse, cultural and religious belief systems, and media and digital sources of information (see, for example, Weingart & Taubert, 2017).

How to retain the best (methodological) elements of the Verwey/Overton meshed approach that is negotiating these seeming schisms is the question for us today, one that requires the kinds of interparadigmatic synergies suggested by Overton-de Klerk. We are in the age of polycrisis, a term that has entered the corporate risk lexicon and is intensively debated at the Davos World Economic Forum (WEF). WEF inaugurated the term in The Global Risks Report (WEF, 2023:57), where it is defined as "a cluster of related global risks with compounding effects, such that the overall impact exceeds the sum of each part". Polycrisis then informs the rest of the discussions on natural resources crisis (conceptualised through parameters of control, competition, constraints and collaboration), and climate and cooperation. But the term is older, as the report acknowledges. Adam Tooze (2022) of Columbia University revitalised the term polycrisis when he applied it to reiterate how global economic crises aggregated with other global crises to comprise an even more disastrous event for humanity. He points us towards Jean-Claude Juncker (2016:1) who uses polycrisis to describe the then crisis in the European Union: "Our various challenges – from the security threats in our neighbourhood and at home, to the refugee crisis, and to the UK referendum – have not only arrived at the same time. They also feed each other, creating a sense of doubt and uncertainty in the minds of our people".

Tooze further inferences Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern's (1999) inauguration of the term in their book *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millenium*. Of polycrisis, they observe (1999:74):

> In fact, there are inter-retroactions between the different problems, crises, and threats. Such is also the case for the problems of health, population, the environment, lifestyle, civilization, and development. So it is also with the crisis of the future, which promotes virulent nationalisms, economic instability, and general balkanization, all of this through inter-retroactions. From a wider perspective, the crisis of the anthroposphere and that of the biosphere are mutually implicative, as are the crises of the past, present, and future.

In all these cases, polycrisis is underpinned by the occurrence of multiple simultaneous catastrophic events, both domestically and internationally, and with regard to environmental stress. This could result in possibly uncontrollable effects (Peregrine, 2023).

This resurgence of polycrisis in different global epochs is not coincidental. The term anticipates a new way of thinking and approaching the world. It also makes crisis a mainstay framework for thinking about the planet as a whole. While such global distress with divergent sources of crisis is not experienced for the first time in the three periods marked by the above references, there is a significant benefit in paying attention to how this thinking begins to permeate the academe and to what end. The erstwhile separate approaches to theory of global ideas are now overshadowed by their aggregation with others. Not only that, but their tangential advantage gets shoved by other forces as intellectuals contemplate, without the capacity to figure out, which crisis precedes the other: is it politics, climate, religious extremism, economic downturns, wars, natural resources, violence, identity or health, and so on. Polycrisis thus extends the boundaries of disciplinary theory to allow for less rigid relations between disciplines (evacuating the advantage of disciplinary precision on which many theories were developed). We are thinking of the complexity of expanding, for instance, Marxism, and making it agile enough to be incepted into, for instance, liberalism, as was the case with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies during the late 1970s and 1980s under the leadership of Richard Johnson and Stuart Hall. Their analysis of the relationship between domination and resistance offers a critique of both capitalism and communism in searching for a third humanistic way between the two extractive and socially exploitative systems.

Upon reflection, then, polycrisis has become a productive way of thinking and of approaching academic theory. It signals the end of theoretical singularity and the onset of a new horizon of multi-planar theory responsive to the nebulous context in which humans encounter nature today. In this case, the disciplinary cocoons are expanding and being engulfed, with indistinguishable frontiers becoming the norm. What was once a clear-cut task for the communication or media theorist is now incepted with combinatorial multi-disciplinary contexts. Polycrisis ushers the innings for new theory building that shifts from the familiar discipline-specific nomenclature. There is now a new direction towards a theory of theories that considers the umbrella of global crisis. The age of global theory, with its emphasis on cosmopolitan reasoning, radical globalism and modernity (see Browning, 2011) is a fitting example of this new approach to global thinking. It is foundational to our rethinking theory building against the backdrop of a polycrisis world, in this case, within strategic communication.

A VAGUE AND BAGGY MONSTER

Cultural and media studies has become what Raymond Williams (1989) called "a vague and baggy monster". Within each component, whether cultural and media studies, journalism, strategic communication or critical management studies, there are contesting strands, contradictions, oppositions and incompatibilities. These are what we need to address in exploring our subject positions, as did Goldman, with regard to whatever trajectories we are each negotiating. Such negotiation is what Overton-de Klerk (2023:4) is offering:

> …time has come to move beyond postmodern thinking towards both–and thinking and embrace a more comprehensive approach of critical complexity, acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between the parts and the whole. Within a complexity framework, it is proposed that a reflective regeneration of strategic communication includes a scrutiny of new logics and lenses relevant in an African context, including Radical Reason and metamodernism, coupled with lateral, collaborative transdisciplinary responses to digital and other complexities facing humanity, also in the workplace.

We now address several nodes that are important to the discussions that follow from this conclusion.

First is the prognosis that theories of the world can no longer be monologic in any disciplinary reasoning. The logic binding the parts and whole, which Overton-de Klerk mentions, is such that this relationship has become a priority, if not the kernel of all meaningful global thinking. In other words, the location of thought is now focused on the interlinkages where the complexity is to be found. The shift taking place is from modular to nodular, that is, from disciplinary compartments to interdisciplinary, multi-epochal and multi-temporal nodes as the new sites of thinking (Browning, 2011:82):

> The global does not merely locate points on a map of the present because the current idea of the world is defined in part by preceding notions of the world. The old and the new are not simply rivals jostling for a position of pre-eminence, but co-operative elements of an on-going enterprise of construction.

This is perhaps the sense that Overton-de Klerk (2023:4) talks about – "the reciprocal relationship between the parts and the whole" – now being interpreted here as an inference to a collaborative view of polycrisis.

Second, we also single out Overton-de Klerk's ideas of Radical Reason and metamodernism as a productively debatable idea to polycrisis thinking and its implications in rethinking strategic communication. Overton-de Klerk's extensive appraisal is that the discipline is now located at various interchanges. These are modernism/postmodernism, reflexive/reflective, functional/co-creational, normative/critical, strategy/strategic-emergence, agent/agency, and disciplinary/transdisciplinary (2023:6–8). She contrasts these trends with various facets of post-COVID crises in strategic communication (2023:9–11), thereby incepting her idea of radical reason, which interacts with radical global theory already proposed by Browning (2011:130) who terms it "a name to stand for all those who aim to achieve a radical change in the ways social practices across the globe are currently conducted". Browning calls this theory "an antagonism to current modes of globalisation, but not a rejection of the global in itself"(2011:130). Morphing this thinking to Overton-de Klerk's effort to re-formulate the binaries of pro-or-anti thinking into and–and framework (as evident in her quadrant of normative critical axis (2023:12)), we can argue that her approach to polycrisis thinking productively conjures a proximal correlation between disciplines, where theorising in one produces striations in the other. In challenging cross-disciplinary rigidities, she establishes a new lane for future theory and paradigm. The concern and observation are that this new framework has arrived before a critical mass of academy and industry professionals have been recruited. What to do about this imbalance is a matter we now must consider urgent, as it touches on both the lag in disciplinary education and the imbalance in thinking and application of strategic communication in the absence of such a balance.

With these two points – significance of nodes and a striated approach to theory – in mind, we thus attend to the matter of polycrisis thinking and its imperatives in higher education research. Our concern is how it can plug into the actual training on the nuts and bolts of doing research. Given the output pressures of the student funding system, our graduates may know only the single static textbook method or reified ahistoricised theory as they have applied it in their individual theses. They need to be exposed to the wider inventory and history of methods that could be applied to any single research question, from qualitative to quantitative, from modelling to less numerical, qualitative and/or hybrid applications. Further, instead of replicating these in facsimile science (see Muller, 2022), we should be adapting, improving and indigenising/recontextualising such techniques. Where to start, and how, is the big task.

On "where", we are not calling for an overhaul of university research training, but for approaches that would allow students to be actively engaged in producing new knowledge rather than just replicating it (as in facsimile science). On "how", our observation concerns the difficulties of doing research as inherently conceptual and procedural, and the consequences as sub-optimal awareness of how nodes across disciplines may be helpful in improved research awareness. The disparate approach that delinks thinking across disciplines also denies the research student an opportunity to see how they fit with other disciplines (and worldviews). A strategic communication researcher who does not fully connect with the techno–social horizons misses out on the benefits of the nodes connecting the two hybridising disciplines. This loss is, of course, conceptual, and is easily missed in casually assessing research from the rigid disciplinary concern or the structured thinking that decouples research from its possible cross-disciplinary intersections.

A breakthrough effort in this direction was registered by Kenenth Harrow (2022) whose work straddles cinema studies and quantum physics, a gigantic cross-disciplinary leap that demonstrates not only the viability of nodal thinking, but its necessity to expand knowledge horizons. The idea is not to theorise less of either discipline but to create an aggregate whole that may contribute more than the individual parts. The same can be said of strategic communication and other disciplines. Where polycrisis continues to influence global thought on formulating theories of the human world, a polytheoretical framework could be an advantageous consideration. The object is to recover the "how to" do research within the broader and baggy discourses that regularly float through academia onto which students fasten with little sense of epistemological derivation, historical context or terminological specificity. Our hypothesis, then, is that much more can be accomplished in research and society by productively harnessing this potential of conflicting disciplinary concerns.

THE BENEFITS OF HISTORY AND DISCIPLINARY IDENTITY

On epistemological derivation, diversity is a strength. The disciplinary history of the two authors of this analysis leans towards reverse conceptual trajectories: one from African cinema studies into studies of urbanism, while the other moved from quantitative urban analysis into qualitative cultural and media studies. The experiences of the first author as an undergraduate student merits a mention in this regard. As a former practising urban geographer, he had grappled with seemingly unrelated disciplines such as climatology, meteorology, surveying, hydrology, geomorphology, urban, economic, cultural and human geography, numerical methods and intuitive modular approaches. Until taught a nodal history and philosophy of science/geography course during the second year of study, the class had no idea why all these disciplines were located within a single department and discipline. Indeed, the discipline of urban geography soon thereafter imported cultural studies concepts into its domain (see Eyles and Smith, 1988; Harvey, 1989). Similarly, the co-author originates from the field of African cinema but ended up researching Africa's urbanism. This research brought together film studies and urban science, using semiotics to develop cultural theories of such cities (Mututa, 2021). Subsequently, his research fell within an engineering department under the African Centre for Cities and he developed further theory on how cinema studies may intersect with urban studies. This experimentation exemplifies the node-based approach to research, where points of connection are sought between traditionally disparate disciplines. We mention this convergence if only to underline our argument about the integral nature of social science of which the Overton-de Klerk prognosis is a contemporary exemplar.

On the historical context, we should discuss history as a tradition of doing research. It is also a resource for supplying content to our contemporary inquiry. In the former, contemporary students must acquaint themselves with the "how" and "why" of research by looking back to how knowledge has been historically produced. This allows responsible and responsive research beyond the structured synchronic and fad-research culture where we cling to any new theme of the day as bogey for missing out (COVID-19 was a huge research terminology not so long ago, and now we are angling towards the Climate Change theme). The latter refers to earlier canonical scholarship in communication and other allied disciplines, which we use here to undergird our discussions. They are the intellectual foundation on which we may scion new ways of thinking. For this reason, they remain fundamental components of contemporary thought.

With regard to terminology, the problem is larger than the technicalities of discipline-specific research or even cross-disciplinary prospects. Terminology specifies our research; it allows us to organically fit within our respective – always hybridising – fields, hopefully now more nodal and modular in character. It is not a single term but a purview of orientated frameworks that allow us access to theories, methods and literature within the field of communication. It is imperative that postgraduate research students become acquainted with how these aspects are connected in research to guard against the culture of "fairy" research.

The crucial nodal question that was so effectively addressed in the first author's second year of study was, "What is geography?" The answer then was "The study of the organisation of space". That was the Eureka moment, as it is also in film studies that involve time–space relations of organisation of the film frame. That's when the class began to make sense of the discipline of geography as a whole and of their respective researcher positions within it, no matter the spread of sub-disciplines within the overall field that comprises environmental studies.

All disciplines have historically addressed the question of conceptual identity. Verwey (2015:16), for example, cites Karl Weick (1989) who argues in a generic vein that theory building best results from "multiple thought trials from various perspectives". His caveat is that this is impossible in a field lacking "disciplinary imagination" where evolutionary processes are analogous to artificial selection. Verwey observes that such a lack had afflicted earlier South African public relations and communication scholarship. C Wright Mills (1959) proposed "the sociological imagination" (thinking like sociologists) and David Harvey (1990) proposed "the geographical (space–time) imagination". The Birmingham School, for a long time headed by Stuart Hall, considered cultural and media studies to embrace the study of "the popular" as forms of resistance to determining hegemonies (whether capitalist or communist), as serviced by positivist technical intellectuals doing "administrative research" (with its specific disciplinary imagination serving prevailing power structures). This approach, which focused on power relations, contrasted with the mid-1980s "Ferment in the Field" moment centred on the 1983 edition of *Journal of Communication*, then edited by George Gerbner when the critical and administrative paradigms squared off against each other. The value of historical interventions and the potentialities to map the contradictions and similarities between different paradigms gain due traction in Overton-de Klerk's work as she tries to reshape strategic communication studies into the unpredictable epoch that we are now entering.

The Overton-de Klerk overview offers a similar discussion about what we do, or think we are doing, with regard to the many variants that constitute "communication studies". She cites Tom O'Regan's (2018) South African Communication Association keynote, which, following one by Michael Morgan (2006), addressed such questions in Australia and the USA, respectively (O'Regan also contributed to the formation of early South African cultural policy). Both had bridged the divide between cultural and media studies on the one hand and corporate/strategic communication studies on the other, in a then rapidly globalising integral world.

COVID-19, however, wrecked the global supply chain between 2020 and 2022. The Russian invasion of Ukraine 2022 saw the withdrawal of Western firms from Russia. Then the Yemen-based Houthi attacked ships in the Red Sea from October 2023. These actions pre-empt us to rethink how to understand the world as integrating or fragmenting. The crisis is further complicated by other global policies, such as China's curtailing of its "foreignerization" policy and the fervent MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement. Even the European Union does not find it easy to step in to protect the hard-won gains of the Enlightenment, as it is dealing with its own internal problems, especially the chaos from the overwhelming influx of refugees from the Middle East, North Africa and Ukraine that is putting national cultural cohesion at risk. Polycrisis today means an imminent risk that globalisation may stall, the Cold War may return, authoritarianism may spread, and refugees and migrants may be exiled to their countries of origin. Rationality and reason are in danger of being replaced with isolationist, nationalist, anti-scientific, superstition-led, victimological conspiracy discourses. A further inexorable crisis is climate change, the unexpected speed with which it is now occurring and the curious incapacity of humans to mitigate the conditions of their own extinction, the tipping point being now upon us (McKay et al., 2022). For South Africa, the crisis has come in the form of de-industrialisation, which has resulted from the failure of our national, regional and city infrastructures, institutions and services since state capture.[3] As Overton-de Klerk in an email dated 26 February 2025 observes of the above paragraph:

> … the pendulum (a key symbol in metamodern thinking) has swung again, ostensibly to the far right. However, in polycrisis and complexity, the movement between left and right and vice versa is too binary, too simplistic and predictable. In polycrisis, the movement of the pendulum resembles more the chaotic "dance" of the double pendulum. Which at some moment (a bifurcation point – or tipping point as you call it) can become stationary and swing in any direction, depending on the ability to seize the moment and come up with something new. Howard Nothhaft and I introduce the double pendulum and discuss the implications for strategic communication.

Under these kinds of extreme circumstance, the Overton-de Klerk article is a potential game changer in the overarching discussion about strategic communication studies through the periods of modernism, postmodernism and the subjective fragmented experiences of metamodernism. It is especially instrumental in combatting the rivalry between disciplinary paradigms in communication studies, much as has happened between theatre and medicine, or sensor technology and geographical navigation. Yet, even then, the unresolved challenge is alleviating communication complexities, such as hierarchical thinking, and its continued significance in the cross-disciplinary production of theory. This also has real-world implications in, among other environments, the corporate environments in which communication scholars operate.

COMPLIANCE

Many parts of the world (including businesses and universities) are regressing into top-down mechanisms of communication, stressed labour relations and sometimes brutal forms of governance. Compliance has become the driving principle in firms, organisations, universities and government departments. One aspect that needs to be added to such discussions is how communication has led to the corporatisation of individuals. This occurs when performance-reward parameters for each member of an organisation "privatises" their performance. For example, self-filled and signed performance contracting, subsequently collated in an overall performance sheet, converts what was once a private proposition into a metric. This implies one's corporate worth where employees are reduced to their job descriptions. In the USA today, this is being used as a reason for termination. This deprives the institution of much value in that an individual is discouraged from participating beyond doing their job "as per the description".

A classic local example was Overton-de Klerk's mention of Tomaselli and Marc Caldwell's (2019) analysis of the merged University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) that had authorised the managerialist technique of adversarial internal communication between 2004 and 2007. The practice of the director of Corporate Communication, previously an activist professor of sociology, had been "transformed" within a rapidly corporatising, massifying and economically stressed environment into an authoritarian management style that forgot the sage lessons of effective management theory. That populist-authoritarian (but not "popular") discourse had claimed "transformation" to justify coercive administrative change. But, in fact, it had the result of achieving the opposite: mass resistance (Chetty & Merrett, 2014).

The study of the UKZN corporate communication practice, commissioned from the office of the Vice Chancellor, thus had real consequences for real people and a real institution, then engaged in a kind of capital (the, if itself divided, UKZN executive)–labour (deans, academics, support, administrative and service staff) struggle, one that has since become unabashedly nationally criminal in practice (see, for example, Jansen, 2023). UKZN is recurringly buffeted by millions of rands in damage to its physical infrastructure. "What will I say to [our donors]"? about these continuing "acts of lunacy" was the current UKZN Vice Chancellor's anguished cry.[4] Failing consensual and mutually devised strategic communication and appropriate management can have catastrophic implications for decades to come.

Students can gain an integral understanding of what they are doing and where they fit in by drawing on the wider literature, while retaining the fidelity of the epistemologies that undergirded early strategic communication studies, simultaneously dynamising them and keeping them relevant during rapidly changing times, which was one of O'Regan's (2018) messages. They can come to appreciate how the very different disciplines represent and study different class-riven antagonistic public constituencies. What conceptual elements, then, fruitfully arise out of the different and same conjunctures, paradigmatic trajectories and contesting histories?

As Overton-de Klerk observed in an email dated 22 October 2024 of an early draft of this response, "Epistemological diversity, the ability to oscillate AND come up with something new is so important to the future of the discipline". We do need to mesh the spatial, sociological and other imaginations into new configurations of analysis. Because the proposition anticipates a steep steer away from the teleological, we propose a related recoverable object of research, a "debriefing" of new and current postgraduate students. In debriefing, the task is to motivate organic enthusiasm for research as research and not just as administrative survival (Johann et al., 2024). Why do researchers approach the task the way they do?

Scholars do a good job when evaluating strategies for research and categorising the different types of researchers alongside their motivations. The emphasis is, understandably, on doing research as a measurable/measured clean activity while streamlining the effort towards the best career leverage. What this does not account for, and what is termed here as debriefing, is how to encourage research as a process that looks beyond the discrete modular outputs-as-products designed for eventual quantitative evaluation, that is, required units for a career, or as qualitative measurement, that is, citations. Instead, it could be researched as an intellectualisation process, as a way of expressing mental ideas without the pressure of instrumentalist productivity unit evaluation. We, of course, live in an academic world of measure frenzy; how many articles, what kind of journals, what other participations, etc. All of these are important (and impatient), but they need to be balanced with the desire for proper mental development that does not derive inspiration from these measurements, but from availing its contents wholesomely.

Like with the Davos meeting, an intense discussion occurred at the 2023 Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) Member Conference about the polycrises occurring in South Africa and how to mitigate them. The conference brochure defined a polycrisis as "… a nested set of globally interactive socio-economic, ecological and cultural-institutional crises that defy reduction to a single cause" (Swilling, 2013). The meeting concluded that the state was contributing to the crisis by failing to develop viable public–private partnerships and that scientists were largely unsuccessful in alerting the government to issues of pressing concern. A recurring comment was that of self-imposed extinction, compounded in the academic sector by author and institutional impatience with regard to overpublishing, oversupply of journals and common denominator outputs. One proposal was how to reorganise the publication environment such that academics could talk to professionals also.

IN CONCLUSION

We end with a quote that we lifted from a financial journalist. Tim Cohen's (2024) "After the Bell" column, where he cited Nobel economist Daniel Kahneman (2017): "… because we are not designed to know how little we know, we make assumptions to fill in the gaps and complete the picture, often wrongly". Kahneman's solution is to think slow but act fast and to recognise what we do not know. The discrepancy starts here: pressure as workload (which requires optimisation of individual performance for the common good), and pressure as demand. What does this have to do with our research? University research occurs within the corporate cultural space, including, among other forms, day-by-day communication and the resulting employee–employer relations. If our studies (like Soviet accounting) are just about ensuring political and administrative compliance and efficiency, primarily building corporate identity, then all we can do is measure in a passive administrative vein the days to our own self-imposed extinction. While many global accounting, auditing and consulting firms were extraordinarily complicit in South African state capture, properly and honestly applied financial oversight is a measure not only of compliance but of the corporate framework where innovation, growth and development occur. But even then, we end up measuring the measure rather than taking action to resolve the actual problem – the intensifying polycrises. However, if we dynamise our theories and practices as is called for by Overton-de-Klerk, then we can ensure optimal conditions for the planet's future.

1 See: https://eaa-online.org/arc/blog/2021/03/26/open-letter-editors-critical-perspectives-accounting/
2 See also: https://www.quora.com/How-did-Soviet-accounting-work
3 The Zondo Commission (2022) reports are available here: https://www.statecapture.org.za
4 Circular to staff and students issued by Prof. N Poku on 24 March 2024: "Communique from the Office of the Vice-Chancellor Addressing Recent Acts of Violence and Key Challenges facing UKZN." See also: Vice-chancellor summoned to answer donors on protest action as UKZN's braces for R30 million damages bill (iol.co.za)

REFERENCES

Benecke, D.R. & Verwey, S. (2020). Post digital dialogue and activism in the public sphere. In M.N. Ndlela & W. Mano (eds.). *Social Media and Elections in Africa*. Challenges and Opportunities, Volume 2. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 135–151.

Bethlehem L. (2002). Two vignettes and a body. *Critical Arts*, 16(1):61–66. Available from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02560240285310081

Browning, G. (2011). *Global theory from Kant to Hardt and Negri*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Burchill, G., Gordon, C. & Miller. P. (1991). *The Foucault effect. Studies in governmentality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Campbell, R.W. (1958). The mechanization of accounting in the Soviet Union. *The American Slavic and East European Review*, 17(1):59–80. Available from: https://doi.org/10.2307/3004302

Chetty, N. & Merrett, C. (2014). *The struggle for the soul of a South African university. The University of KwaZulu-Natal. Academic freedom, corporatization, and transformation*. Pietermaritzburg: The Natal Society Foundation.

Coetzee, I. & van der Waal, G-M. (eds.) 1988. *The conservation of culture. Changing context and challenges*. Pretoria: Conference Organisers.

Cohen, T. (2024). After the bell: What did Daniel Kahneman stand for? Think fast. *Daily Maverick*, 01 April. Available from: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-04-01-after-the-bell-what-did-daniel-kahneman-stand-for-think-fast/

Connell, K. & Hilton, M. (eds.) (2016). *Cultural studies 50 years on. History, practice and politics*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

Couldry, N., Stephansen, H., Fotopoulou, A., MacDonald, R., Clark, W. & Dickens, L. (2014). Digital citizenship? Narrative exchange and the changing terms of civic culture. *Citizenship Studies*, 18(6–7):615–629. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2013.865903

Diakonoff, V.A. (1929). Accounting in Soviet Russia. *Journal of Accountancy*, 48(1):32–36. Available from: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1062&context=jofa

Eyles, J.& Smith, D.M. (eds.) 1988. *Qualitative methods in human geography*. London: Polity.

Fuhr, I. & De Klerk, N. (2024). *The human bridge. Racial healing in South Africa*. Bryanston: Tracey McDonald Publishers.

George, B. (2024). Why Boeing's problems with the 737 MAX began more than 25 years ago. January 24. *Havard Business School – Working Knowledge: The latest HBS ideas for today's business leaders*. Available from: https://www.library.hbs.edu/working-knowledge/why-boeings-problems-with-737-max-began-more-than-25-years-ago

Gerbner, G. (ed.) (1983). "Ferment in the Field: Communications Scholars Address Critical Issues and Research Tasks of the Discipline." *Journal of Communication* 33(3).

Goldman, G.A. (2023). "I Searched for form and land, for years and years I roamed": Reflecting on an (a)typical academic journey. *Critical Arts*, 37(5):111–121. Available from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02560046.2024.2305830

Goldman, G.A. (2021). *Critical management studies in South Africa: Directions and contexts*. Cape Town: AOSIS Scholarly Books.

Habermas, J. (1991). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (T. Burger with F. Lawrence, trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hall, S. (1980). "Cultural Studies and the Centre: Some Problematics and Problems." In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Loew, & P. Willis (eds.). *Culture, media, language*. London: Hutchinson, 15–47.

Harrow, K.W. (2022). *Space and time in African cinema and cinescapes*. New York and London: Routledge.

Harvey, D. (1990). Between space and time: Reflections on geographical imagination. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*,. 80(3):418–434. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1990.tb00305.x

Harvey, D. (1989). *The condition of postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Jansen, J. (2023). Corrupted. *A study of chronic dysfunction in South African universities*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Jayyusi, L. (2002). Letters from the Palestinian ghetto. *Critical Arts*, 16(1):47–52. Available from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02560240285310051

Johann, D., Neufeld, J., Thomas, K., Rathmann, J. & Rauhut, H. (2024). The impact of researchers' perceived pressure on their publication strategies. *Research Evaluation* 00: 1–16. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvae011

Johnson, R. (1979). Histories of culture/theories of ideology: notes on Impasse. In M. Barrett, P. Corrigan, A. Kuhn & J. Wolff (eds.). *Ideology and cultural production*. London: Croom Helm.

Juncker, J-C. (2016). Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the Annual General Meeting of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV). 21 June. Athens. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_16_2293

Kahneman, D. (2017). Thinking, *fast and slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Available from: http://dspace.vnbrims.org:13000/jspui/bitstream/123456789/2224/1/Daniel-Kahneman-Thinking-Fast-and-Slow-.pdf

Laclau, E. & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. London: Verso.

Lehman, L.E. & Moore, R.M. (eds.). 1992. *Multinational culture. Social impacts on a global economy*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

McKay, A. Staal, A., Abrams, J.F., Winkelmann, R., Sakschewski, B., Loriani, S., Fetzer, I., Cornell, S. Rockström, J. & Lenton, T.M. (2022). Exceeding 1.5°C global warming could trigger multiple climate tipping points. *Science* 377(6611):1–11. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abn7950

Mills, C.W. (1959). *Sociological imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Morgan. M. (2006). Keynote address: To count or not to count in communication research. What is the question? In D.P. Conradie, W.E. Fourie, H. Wasserman and C. Muir (eds.). *Communication science in South Africa: Contemporary issues*. Cape Town: Juta, 11–23.

Morin, E. & Kern, A.B (1999). *Homeland earth: A manifesto for the new millennium* (S.M. Kelly & R. LaPointe, trans.). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Muller, S.M. (2022). *The incentivised university: Scientific revolutions, policies, consequences*. Cham: Springer.

Mututa, A. (2021). *Crisis urbanism and postcolonial African cities in postmillennial cinema*. London: Routledge. Available from: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003122098

Nothhaft, H.& Overton-de Klerk, N. (2025). Strategic communication and metamodernism. Shall we dance? Towards complexity beyond linear compromise. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 44(1):4-23.

O'Regan, T. (2018). Between exacerbation and alleviation? Media in transition, social transformation and inclusiveness. *Communicare*, 37(2):1–16. Available from: https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-127eed92a7

Overton-de Klerk, N. (2023). Reflections on the current state and future of strategic communication as strategic paradigm and practice. *Communicare*, 42(1):4–21. Available from:

https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-comcare_v42_n1_a2

Overton-de Klerk N. & Verwey, S. (2013). Towards an emerging paradigm of strategic communication: Core driving forces. *Communicatio*, 39(3):362–382. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2013.837626

Peregrine, M. (2023). Davos obsession with 'Polycrisis' may seem remote, but corporate boards should take notice. *Forbes*, 18 January. Available from: https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelperegrine/2023/01/18/davos-polycrisis-and-the-globalization-of-corporate-governance/?sh=342becaa71a6

Swilling, M. (2013). Economic crisis, long waves and the sustainability transition: An African perspective. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 6 (March):96–115. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2012.11.001

Tomaselli, K.G. (2021). Australian cultural policy studies, South African exceptionalism. *Continuum* 35(3):414–426. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2021.1902153

Tomaselli, K.G. (ed.). (2018). *Making sense of research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.

Tomaselli. K. & Caldwell, M. (2019). Corporate communication – adversarial, transmission, dialogical. *Communicatio*, 45(2):56–80. Available from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02500167.2019.1626459

Tooze, A. (2022). Welcome to the world of the polycrisis. *Financial Times*, 28 October. Available from: https://www.ft.com/content/498398e7-11b1-494b-9cd3-6d669dc3de33

Verwey, S. (2015). Paradigms, perspectives and practice of public relations and communication: Implications for 'disciplined imagination' in South African scholarship. *Communitas*, 20:1–25. Available from: https://doi.org/10.38140/com.v20i0.1019

Williams, R. (1989). The future of cultural studies. Available from: https://www.scribd.com/document/167751012/Williams-R-The-Future-of-Cultural-Studies-copy-pdf

Weingart, P. & Taubert, N. (eds.). (2017). *The future of scholarly publishing*. Stellenbosch: African Minds.

Weick, K.E. (1989). Theory construction as disciplined imagination. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4):516–531. Available from: https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1989.4308376

World Economic Forum (WEF). (2023). *The global risks report* (2023). Geneva: World Economic Forum.

Trends in Research on Strategic Communication, Strategic Integrated Communication, Personal Branding and Brand Advocacy in the Context of Higher Education

AUTHOR(S)

Jacobus Marthinus de Villiers
North-West University, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7789-117X

Anette Degenaar
North-West University, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2767-5986

Lynnette Fourie
North-West University, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7128-4958

PUBLISHED ONLINE
Volume 44 (1) May 2025
Pages 36-55
Submitted January 2024
Accepted March 2025

DOI
10.36615/rjj5g096

ISSN
Online 2957-7950
Print 0259-0069

Abstract

Higher education institutions in South Africa find themselves in situations of strategic complexity due to contextual changes in the higher education landscape. One of these challenges is the complexity of stakeholders within the higher education context, specifically students and alumni. In this regard, students function as internal stakeholders, and once they graduate, they become external stakeholders. Furthermore, due to their connection with a higher education institution, both students and alumni, through their personal brands, can contribute to or diminish strategic communication endeavours by higher education brands. Thus, an integrated communication approach is needed to strategically align student and alumni personal brands with higher education institution brands. Through a systematic literature review, this study explored the integration of relevant concepts to the problem at hand: strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, brand advocacy and personal branding. The conducted review found that these theoretical concepts had limited theoretical overlap with concepts covered in academic articles found on selected academic databases. The absence of interrelatedness between the theoretical foundations and empirical evidence of these concepts highlights the gap in research on the complexity of stakeholders in higher education from a strategic communication perspective. This article adds value to the perspectives on stakeholders in higher education institutions.

Keywords

Brand advocacy, higher education, personal branding, strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, systematic literature review

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) face various challenges regarding the environments in which they function. These challenges are brought about by factors such as the massification of higher education, increased competition, globalisation, internationalisation and less financial support from various stakeholders (Balaji et al., 2016:3023; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016:3020). These challenges have forced brand managers in HEIs to conceptualise unique identities, explore the multiple meanings held by different stakeholder groups and find ways to differentiate an HEI's reputation within a highly competitive market (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016:3019). Branding can support HEIs in communicating the value proposition of an institution to stakeholders, while at the same time differentiating an institution from competitors (Balaji et al., 2016:3023).

Students and alumni can also contribute to the branding of HEIs through advocacy intentions such as safeguarding a university, representing the university when engaging external stakeholders, providing positive word-of-mouth and recruiting prospective students on behalf of the HEI (Balaji et al., 2016:3026). Achieving this requires timely and relevant communication and consistent brand experiences from management with students. Consequently, engaging students and alumni at various brand touchpoints will enable them to turn brand identity into brand reality during engagement with external stakeholders (Dean et al., 2016:3047). However, employing students and alumni as brand advocates to support and strengthen an HEI's brand may lead to possible reputational risk. As much as students and alumni can support branding behaviour, their personal brand or actions can contradict an HEI's strategic intent (dream, purpose and values).

Students and alumni sometimes attach themselves to the brand of an HEI as a reference group to communicate their self-concept to others (Balaji et al., 2016:3026). However, social identities are complex, and students construct them based on various experiences and reference groups. Furthermore, students also differ in their ability to communicate their characteristics to different stakeholder groups when engaging in personal branding (Gorbatov et al., 2018:6). Thus, when a student's personal brand is not carefully constructed or aligned with a university brand's identity and image, their communication behaviour can potentially dilute an HEI's brand image (Choi et al., 2021:328; Ferraro et al., 2013:486). The credibility of a student's social identity and personal brand thus adds credibility to an HEI's identity, image and reputation. HEIs should thus guide students to understand their social identity and teach them how to communicate their personal brand. They should position students as credible brand advocates within their community or industry once they graduate as alumni (Escalas, 2004:170; Ferraro et al., 2013:477). Consequently, if HEIs do not guide students and alumni to construct their personal brands, they may damage the reputation of HEIs in their communities or even industry. A more strategic approach may support HEIs to align students and alumni to their brand identity.

Strategic communication is an interdisciplinary paradigm that provides researchers with an integrated conceptual framework to study how organisations position themselves, interact with stakeholders according to their mission and make sense of issues brought about by poly-contextual environments (Hallahan et al., 2007:16; Verwey & Benecke, 2021:67). Within this paradigm, scholars and professionals within strategic communication should contribute to the development of integrated concepts and theoretical frames that provide a holistic perspective on organisational communication (Werder et al., 2018:349). Due to the complexities created by students and alumni as brand advocates in relation to their personal brands, a more strategic communication approach is required. Through advocacy, students and alumni can help different HEI stakeholders to make meaning and serve as brand voices within a complex poly-contextual environment.

The complexity of the challenges faced by HEIs and the importance of identity, image and reputation to navigate these challenges require a more strategic approach to communication to use students and alumni to support branding initiatives by HEIs. Furthermore, Niemann's (2005) South African Model for Strategic Integrated Communication aligns messages by considering the organisation, stakeholders and the environment. This model takes an outside-in perspective on stakeholder engagement and can ensure direction and mutual understanding between different stakeholders (Niemann-Struweg, 2014:189). By aligning students with the strategic intent of HEIs through communication and branding, students can not only become credible alumni with strong personal brands within industry, but also contribute to an HEIs identity, image and reputation through advocacy behaviour. The question can thus be posed: What are the main research trends in strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, brand advocacy and personal branding within the context of higher education? This article identifies the main research trends on strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, brand advocacy and personal branding within the context of higher education. Consequently, the stance of research and overlap and relationships between concepts can be explored, and current gaps in the research can be identified for future research.

To address this question, a systematic literature review was conducted to explore the existing research trends on strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, brand advocacy and personal branding within the context of higher education. This systematic literature review was conducted to provide an up-to-date overview of the available literature, while systematically following a process to avoid selection bias when synthesising and summarising literature. For this study, the systematic literature review was conducted to identify the conceptual boundaries, research samples and sizes, the evidence available from prior studies and gaps within the research (Xiao & Watson, 2019:99). This article highlights the methodological process followed in conducting the systematic literature review, provides an overview of the analysed data and also provides an overview of the key findings obtained from the systematic literature review.

METHODS

For this study Pickering and Byrne's (2014:539) stages for systematically reviewing and assessing literature were followed, as these stages are beneficial to study emergent and interdisciplinary paradigms (Figure 1). Furthermore, Pickering and Byrne's (2014:538) steps enable scholars to create a map of literature that demarcates the boundaries, gaps, geography, methodologies, deficiencies and most critical subjects available to scholars for future research.

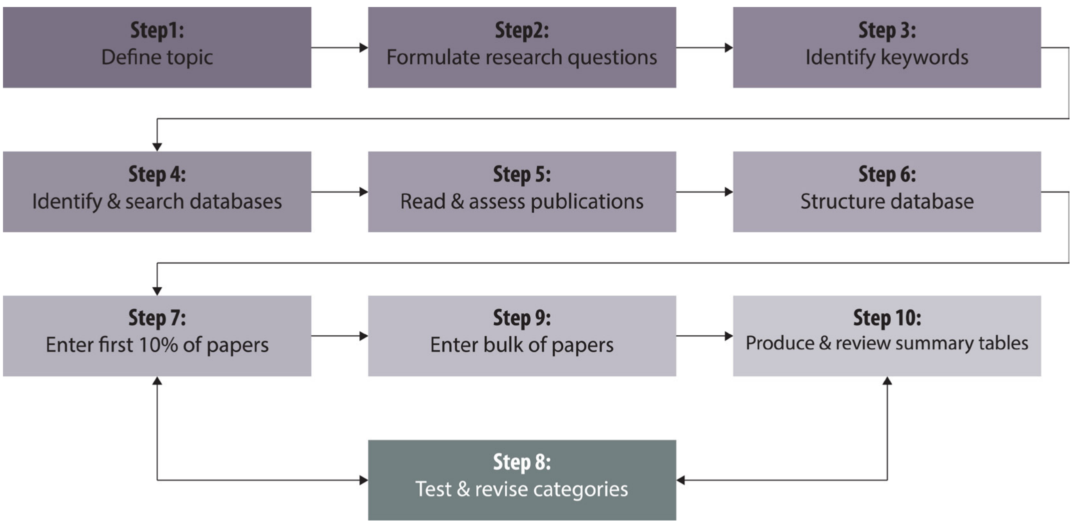

Figure 1: Steps in the systematic literature review (Pickering & Byrne, 2014)

In the background of this article, the topic has been defined (Step 1), and the research question has been outlined (Step 2). To answer the research question, the researchers identified the key terms: strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, personal branding, brand advocacy and higher education (Step 3). No synonyms were used for any of the keywords, except for higher education due to the use of different terminology within different countries to describe HEIs. Thus, only contextual differences in terminology were considered, while no synonyms were used for theoretical constructs to ensure that this study explored the theoretical concepts within their scope of meaning. The following keywords were used to search the titles and abstracts of articles on various databases: "Strategic Integrated Communication", "Strategic Communication", "Brand Advoca*", "Personal Brand*", ("higher education" OR "tertiary education" OR universit* OR college*). By clearly defining the topic and formulating the research question, the researchers set the parameters of the study and identified the keywords based on these parameters to add to the validity of the study.

To ensure the validity of this study, a meeting was scheduled with the North-West University Faculty of Humanities Subject Librarian to check the keywords and the use of bullion for the study. Furthermore, the Faculty Librarian advised the researchers on which databases to consult for the systematic literature review to ensure further reliability (Step 4 – see Figure 2 for an overview of the databases consulted). A total of 13 databases were identified for this study, namely Academic Search Premier, Business Source Complete, Communication Source, eBook Open Access, eBook Collection, Eric, Emerald, Web of Science, Science Direct, Scopus, African Journal, Social Science Index and JSTOR. Before the systematic literature review could commence and to ensure the validity of this study, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria had to be identified. For this study, the first criterion was linked to timeframes. No specific timeframes were excluded so as not to limit search findings. The researchers included individual research articles and collective works within the study as the second criterion. The third criterion was that articles had to include two to five keywords. By doing this, 1) the researchers could see the extent to which theoretical constructs have been researched together, and 2) the researchers could determine the extent to which the concepts have been researched in the context of higher education. A fourth criterion was that articles had to be written in English.

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) were used to systematically document each step of the literature review process (see Figure 2).

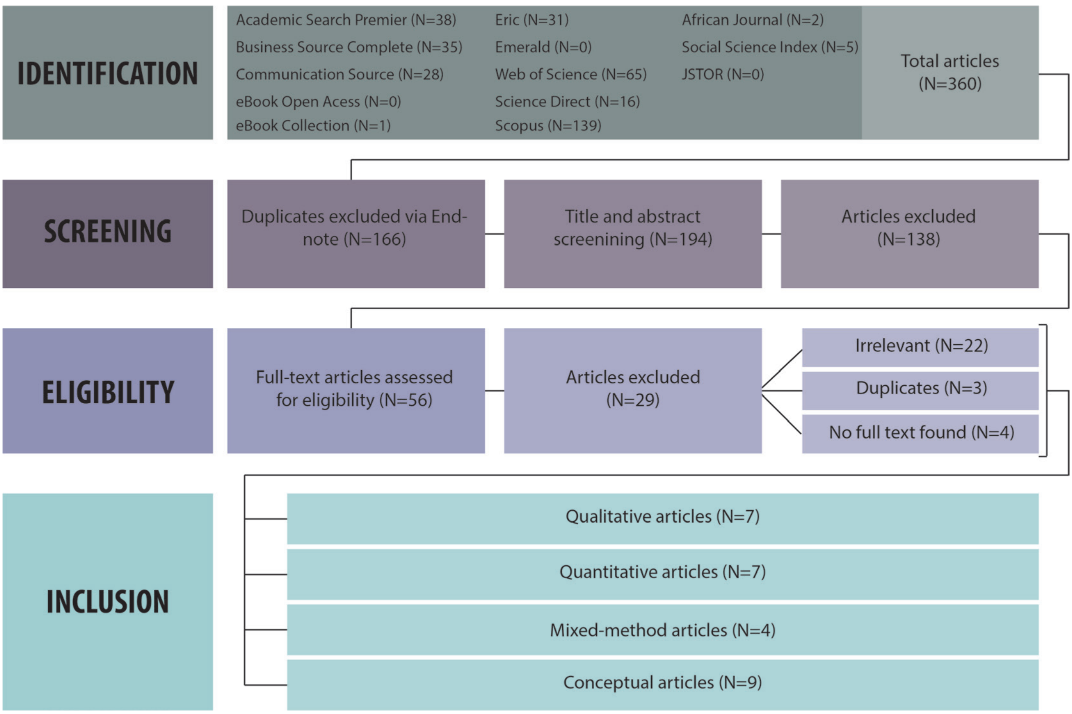

Figure 2: A PRISMA flowchart illustrating the process and findings of the systematic literature review

A search was conducted on all 13 databases by including all five keywords and then using a combination of four keywords, then three and, finally, only two (Step 5). The search took place between 17 August 2022 and 30 August 2022. The titles and abstracts of articles on the different databases were scanned to find articles to include in this study. Only articles containing up to two combinations of keywords were found on the databases. The search findings thus indicate that a gap exists regarding existing literature and that no study has identified all of the concepts included in this article (strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, personal branding and brand advocacy) in the context of higher education.

A total of 360 articles were found and imported into the Endnote reference management tool to remove possible duplicates. After removing 166 duplicates, the researchers screened the remaining 194 titles and abstracts of the articles identified through the systematic literature review. During this screening step, the researchers removed 138 articles (review articles, grey literature, irrelevant articles and articles not written in English). A total of 56 full articles and textbooks were then captured in a Microsoft Excel document. These were assessed and coded using ATLAS.ti™ software as part of the eligibility screening (Step 6). It is important to note that despite the textbook consisting of numerous chapters, the collective work was only captured as a single unit in this systematic literature review, despite numerous chapters being included in the analysis. A total of 10% of the articles were entered and coded (Step 7). The codes and articles were then peer-reviewed by a subject specialist to refine categories and sub-categories (Step 8). The peer reviewer received a list of the articles as well as the reason for the inclusion and exclusion of articles. The reviewer was then asked to review 10% of the articles and to indicate whether they agreed with the inclusion and exclusion of articles as well as the categories and sub-categories. No changes were made to the categories and sub-categories constructed during the peer-review process. The remaining articles were then uploaded into the excel document capturing the author details, year of publication, article title and journal name. The essence of the article was also identified and, finally, the research design was identified. From the 56 eligible articles, an additional 29 articles were removed (Step 9). The researchers then analysed the excel document and the ATLAS.ti™ codes to identify patterns and gaps in the literature (Step 10). To ensure intra-coder reliability, clear categories were identified in line with the research aim of the study at hand. Intra-coder reliability was also maintained by carefully documenting each step and indicating the reasons for the inclusion or exclusion of an article in line with the categories. The documentation was provided to the peer reviewer, who checked the reliability of the findings. The coder was transparent throughout the process and provided all relevant information to the peer reviewer to ensure further intra-coder reliability. To ensure the validity of this study, the researchers carefully documented each step of the study and communicated the results and findings in each step (see Figure 2 and Table 1).

FINDINGS

A total of 27 articles were identified that used a combination of different keywords relevant to this study (Table 1).

LEGEND TABLE 1

COLOUR	KEYWORDS	ABBREVIATION
	Personal Branding and Higher Education	PB & HE
	Higher Education and Strategic Communication	HE & SC
	Higher Education and Brand Advocacy	HE & BA
	Strategic Communication and Higher Education	SC & HE
	Strategic Communication and Strategic Integrated Communication	SC & HE

Table 1: Contextual and theoretical articles identified through the systematic literature review

Author	Title	Year	Journal	Keywords	Research focus	Design
Shepherd	From cattle and coke to Charlie: Meeting the challenge of self marketing and personal branding	2005	*Journal of Marketing Management*	PB & HE	Personal branding: Management	Conceptual article
Gander	Managing your personal brand	2014	*Perspectives: Policy & Practice in Higher Education*	PB & HE	Personal branding: Management	Conceptual article
Rangarajan et al.	Strategic personal branding and how it pays off	2017	*Business Horizons*	PB & HE	Personal branding: Brand management	Qualitative study
Gujarathi	Understanding personal branding perceptions through intentions	2018	*BVIMSR Journal of Management Research*	PB & HE	Personal branding: student perceptions	Quantitative research
Ilies	Strategic personal branding framework for students and young professionals	2018	*Cross-Cultural Management Journal*	PB & HE	Personal branding Model/frame	Qualitative research
Khedher	Conceptualising and researching personal branding effects on the employability	2019	*Journal of Brand Management*	PB & HE	Personal branding: Management	Qualitative research
Molares-Cardoso et al.	The importance of personal branding as an element of public relations: an international experience	2020	*Comunicacao e Sociedade*	PB & HE	Personal branding: Student perceptions	Quantitative research
Allison, et al.	The impact and mediating role of personal brand authenticity on the self-actualization of university graduates entering the workforce	2020	*Journal for Advancement of Marketing Education*	PB & HE	Personal branding: Model/frame	Quantitative research
Girard et al.	Understanding student perceptions of their personal branding in higher education	2020	*Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*	PB & HE	Personal branding: student perceptions	Quantitative research
Anderson & Tomlinson	Signaling standout graduate employability: The employer perspective	2021	*Human Resource Management Journal*	PB & HE	Personal branding: Standout employability	Qualitative research
Overton-de-Klerk & Sinaert	From research excellence to brand relevance: A model for higher education reputation building	2016	*South African Journal of Science*	HE & SC	Identity, image, and reputation	Conceptual article
Rengel et al.	Analysis of communication factors influencing customer loyalty among university students	2017	*Revista Latina de Comunicacion Social*	HE & SC	Identity, image, and reputation	Mixed-method study
Mohamad et al.	Corporate identity management and employee brand support: Enhancing marketisation in higher education sector	2017	*Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*	HE & SC	Identity, image, and reputation	Mixed-method study
Lee et al.	Strategic communication in US higher education: Testing congruity effects of university identity and image among parents of prospective students	2018	*International Journal of Strategic Communication*	HE & SC	Identity, image, and reputation	Quantitative research

Lee et al.	Strategic communication in US higher education: Testing congruity effects of university identity and image among parents of prospective students	2018	*International Journal of Strategic Communication*	HE & SC	Identity, image, and reputation	Quantitative research
Hadji	Analysing the strategic role of communication practitioners in South African universities	2022	*Communicatio*	HE & SC	Role of practitioner	Qualitative research
Karunannayaka et al.	The effect of perceived value-in-use in student advocacy behavior of private higher education institution in Malaysia: A conceptual framework	2019	*Global Business & Management Research*	HE & BA	Advocacy behaviour	Conceptual article
Samala & Singh	Millennial's engagement with fashion brands	2019	*Journal of Fashion Marketing & Management*	HE & BA	Brand love	Quantitative research
Das et al.	Empirically examining the psychological mechanism of a loved and trusted business school brand	2021	*Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*	HE & BA	Brand love	Mixed-method study
Botan & Soto	A semiotic approach to the internal functioning of publics: Implications for strategic communication and public relations	1998	*Public Relations Review*	SC & HE	Stakeholder approach	Conceptual article
Tsai	Integrated marketing as management of holistic consumer experience	2005	*Business Horizons*	SC & HE	Stakeholder approach	Conceptual article
De Beer et al.	The Pretoria School of Thought: From strategy to governance and sustainability	2013	Book: *Public Relations and Communication Management: Current Trends and Emerging Topics*	SC & HE	Communication strategist	Conceptual article
Zerfass et al.	Strategic communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and practice	2018	*International Journal of Strategic Communication*	SC & HE	New perspectives	Conceptual article
Werder et al.	Strategic communication as an emerging interdisciplinary paradigm	2018	*International Journal of Strategic Communication*	SC & HE	New perspectives	Quantitative research
Holtzhausen & Zerfass	*The Routledge handbook of strategic communication*	2021	Book: Routledge publishers	SC & HE	New perspectives	Mixed-method study
Benecke et al.	The role of the Global Capability Framework within the strategic communication profession in an emerging post-COVID-19 context: A South African perspective	2021	*ESSACHESS –Journal for Communication Studies*	SC & HE	New perspectives	Qualitative study
Barker	Strategic integrated communication: An alternative perspective of integrated marketing communication?	2013	*Communicatio:*	SC & SIC	Strategic integrated communication: perspectives	Conceptual article
Niemann-Struweg	An integrated communication implementation model for the post-2000 business environment	2014	*Public Relations Review*	SC & SIC	Strategic integrated communication: Model	Qualitative research

Articles were divided into two categories: mainly contextual articles and theoretical articles (see Table 2). Based on the findings, personal branding has been researched the most in the context of higher education, followed by strategic communication. Lastly, the findings indicate that limited research on brand advocacy exists in the context of higher education. The findings further indicate a minimum overlap between the different theoretical constructs relevant to this study. From the findings, only two articles were found that linked strategic communication with strategic integrated communication.

Table 2: Contextual and theoretical articles identified through the systematic literature review

Contextual articles		Theoretical articles	
Keywords	Number of articles	Keywords	Number of articles
Personal branding and higher education	10	Strategic communication and higher education	7
Strategic communication and higher education	5	Strategic communication and strategic integrated communication	2
Higher education and brand advocacy	3		
Total contextual articles	18	**Total theoretical articles**	9

The characteristics of the articles also yielded varied findings. Most articles identified through the systematic literature review were published after 2011, with only three articles published before 2011. The articles also seemed scattered among various journals, except for three articles from the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, two articles identified from the *Business Horizons Journal*, and two from the journal *Communicatio*. Lastly, from the 27 articles identified, only three articles were found in South African journals.

The research articles identified through the systematic literature review also differed in research approaches (see Table 1 for list of the articles identified and the research approach used in each article). Most of the articles identified (nine in total) were conceptual articles, followed by quantitative (eight) and then qualitative (seven) articles. Only four articles used a mixed-method approach to research.

The following section discusses the extent to which the leading research trends on strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, brand advocacy and personal branding have been explored within the context of higher education.

DISCUSSION

Figure 3 provides an overview of the number of articles found and the broad themes identified in the articles. The first three sub-headings provide insights on personal branding, strategic communication and brand advocacy in the context of HEIs, while the final two sub-headings explore the theoretical developments of strategic communication and strategic communication in academia in general, and do not specifically contextualise information in the higher education sector.

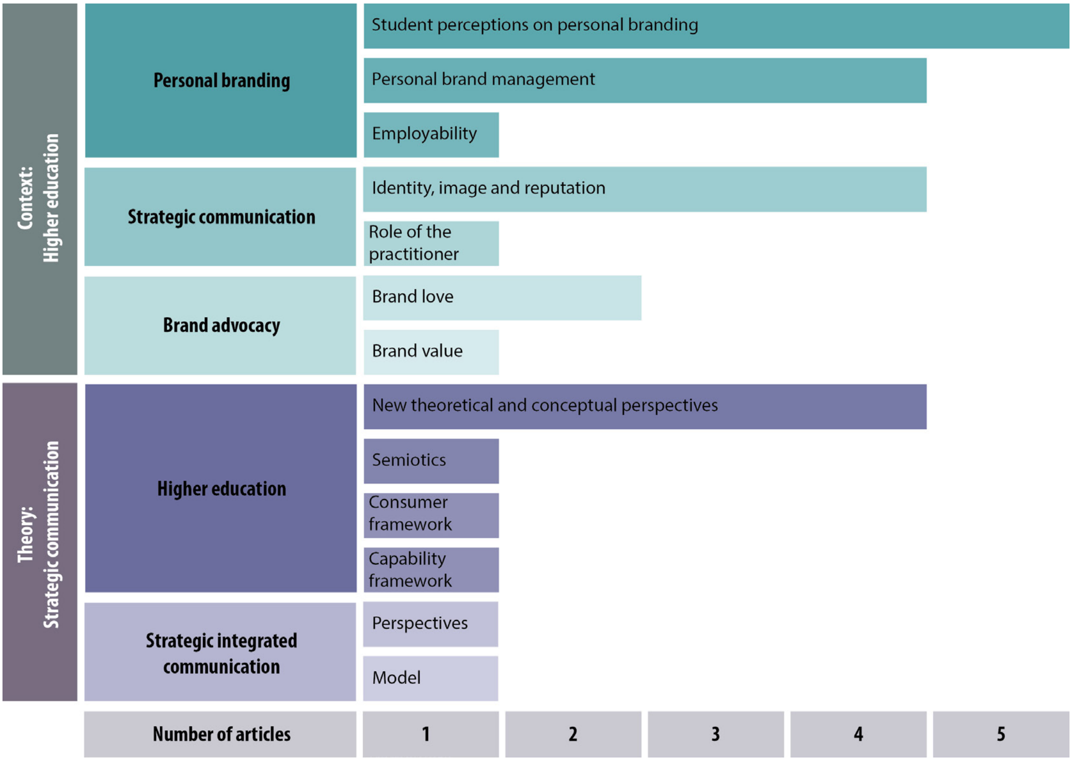

Figure 3: An overview of the number of articles and themes found linked to the combination of keywords used during the systematic literature review

Higher education and personal branding

The keywords that generated the most findings regarding the context were higher education and personal branding. A total of 10 articles were found combining the two terms in the title or abstract. The findings of the systematic literature review provided different perspectives on higher education and personal branding. Three main research trends could be identified about personal branding.

The first theme that emerged was the management of personal brands within the context of higher education, of which four articles contributed to this theme. An article by Shepherd (2005) explored the academic interest in personal branding from a marketing perspective. Shepherd (2005:592) points out that no conceptual framework existed at the time for personal branding and argues that the concepts need more empirical and theoretical evidence to support personal branding as a theoretical construct. Based on this premise, Shepherd criticised personal branding for merely extending concepts from marketing to individuals without considering the complexity of human identity. Thus, in his view, a re-theorising of personal branding was necessary, as the narrative surrounding personal branding was dominated by self-help books, gurus and career advisors, without empirical evidence from academia included in such a narrative (Shepherd, 2005:602). Another article on the management of personal branding was a perspective by Gander (2014) on how stakeholders in the higher education context could build their personal brand. Despite the call for more scientific rigour through research by Shepherd (2005), Gander's (2014) article provides insights from the literature on personal branding. This article seems to advocate including personal branding in career development in higher education by providing practical tips and tools to construct and manage personal brands. From a stronger industry perspective, Rangarajan et al. (2017) conducted 33 interviews with professionals in the United States and Europe. Based on their interview findings, Rangarajan et al. (2017:664) identified four recommendations on how professionals could manage their personal brand (balance respect-building and relationship-building, bolster personal branding with organisational support, embrace flexibility and evaluate brands over time to adapt). From this perspective, Rangarajan et al. (2017:665) highlight the importance of personal branding in the industry and emphasise the importance of organisational support to improve employees' personal brands to benefit the organisational brand. A study conducted by Khedher (2019) among 54 Tunisian university graduates also explored how personal branding could shape employment outcomes. Based on Khedher's (2019:104) research, cultural capital, social capital, appearance, authenticity and mediated and verbal presentations all play a role when positioning oneself in an industry to be employed. From this perspective, Khedher (2019:107) found a positive relationship between personal branding and employability. This study also confirmed a variation in how graduates engaged in personal branding and highlighted how personal branding is becoming a key differentiator among university graduates.

A second theme identified that supports the arguments made by Khedher (2019) was an article written by Anderson and Tomlinson (2020) on signalling standout employability. Nineteen interviews were conducted with 19 organisations (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2019:681). Based on their findings, Anderson and Tomlinson (2019:689) argue that HEIs must enable students to articulate their narratives to communicate and improve their personal brands in a way that meets the employers' signalling expectations. Based on this article, qualifications, personal qualities, psychological qualities, personal branding, work-related experience, person-organisation fit and back stories all play an essential role in signalling graduate employability. From the analysis of this article, standout employability does, to some extent, link to personal branding. However, various other conditions can contribute to signalling standout employability. Thus, standout employability could be seen as a lesser theme in relation to personal branding in the higher education context. From this perspective, personal branding is seen as one of many factors that could signal standout employability, while the argument could be made that qualifications, personal qualities, psychological qualities, work-related experience and back stories all contribute to the development of a personal brand. The narrative communicated regarding one's personal brand would then give an indication of the person–organisation fit, which could signal standout employability.

A third theme evident from the research was students' perceptions of the development of personal brands. Five studies were identified through the systematic literature review. The first study conducted by Ilies (2018), who observed 286 Romanian communication, public relations and advertising students over a period of five years, found that students want to have fulfilling and dynamic professional careers. Ilies (2018:46) maintains that students need assistance with developing their personal brands. Due to this, Ilies (2018) developed a strategic personal branding plan to guide students and young professionals to develop a personal brand. In another study, Gujarathi and Kulkarni (2018) explored students in management's perceptions of personal branding. The study randomly sampled 51 graduates who completed their MBA/PGDMA from a public university in Mumbai (Gujarathi & Kukarni, 2018:211). The study measured students' perceptions of their university's support in enabling students to gain employment. The study found a favourable attitude towards the institution for assisting students with their personal brand development. From the articles above, it becomes evident that students, to some extent, view it as the responsibility of HEIs to invest in their personal brand development. In turn, developing student brands to increase the probability of employment also seemed to create a positive attitude towards the institution.

In line with the theme of students' perceptions of the development of personal brands, Molares-Cardoso et al. (2020) examined the degree of knowledge that students in communication had on personal branding and its application to the field of public relations. The study included 300 students from two Spanish universities and one Portuguese university (Molares-Cardoso et al., 2020:23). Through their research Molares-Cardoso et al. (2020:32) found that Spanish students showed an interest in the topic of personal branding, showcasing the need for an increase in education on personal branding. The study further found that Portuguese students were more aware of the importance of personal branding. Despite the differences in awareness between students in different countries, Girard et al. (2020) administered a questionnaire to students at two differently owned universities within the United States (one private and one public university). From the questionnaire 298 responses were obtained from participants (Girard et al. 2020:138). Instead of measuring the awareness held by students regarding the topic, the study aimed to understand the most important attributes of personal branding to students. The study found that most of the important attributes of a personal brand were linked to intrinsic attributes such as self-motivation, work ethic and problem-solving (Girard et al. 2020:144). Even though students are responsible for the development of their intrinsic attributes, Girard et al. (2020:144) maintain that educational experience can support the development of these attributes. Thus, learning environments and educational experiences should be strategically planned to address gaps in students' intrinsic attributes. Improving personal branding attributes aligned with the university's strategic intent could improve the student's personal brand and the university's image. Furthermore, improving a student's attributes is linked to personal branding. Research conducted among 117 undergraduate business school students in the United States by Allison et al. (2020) not only confirmed the importance of personal branding, but found that higher levels of personal brand authenticity led to increasing students' self-actualisation. The study further argues that students tend to focus on personal branding only as they get closer to graduation. However, as personal branding is a long-term process, it should be started earlier in a student's academic career. Personal branding activities should be incorporated into the university curriculum to prepare students better to construct and develop their personal brands.

From the literature identified through the systematic literature review, it is evident that since 2005, academia has made various empirical and contextual contributions regarding personal branding. Various authors have explored the management of personal branding in the context of higher education by focusing on the management of brands and students' perceptions of personal branding. Despite the limited number of resources found regarding personal branding in higher education, the literature included in this study shows that strides have been made to explore the relevance of personal branding in the context of higher education. Despite this, the systematic literature review did not adequately identify studies exploring the theoretical foundations of personal branding concerning higher education. This gap in theoretical foundations poses a problem for HEIs, as the empirical studies identified above allude to the fact that students see it as the responsibility of HEIs to support them with personal brand development.

Higher education and strategic communication

The keywords that provided the second-most findings regarding context were higher education and strategic communication. Five articles were identified through the systematic literature review. Most of the articles were linked to identity, image and reputation, and how these link to strategic communication in the higher education context, while one article focused on the role of strategic communication practitioners in HEIs.

An article by Overton-de Klerk (2016) criticises reputation development in HEIs due to their linear and modernist focus on university rankings linked to research excellence. Overton-de Klerk (2016:7) advocates alternative ways of differentiation of HEIs through brand relevance and co-creating brand meaning through collaborating with stakeholders. She adds that a stakeholder-centric approach is required that includes internal stakeholders, end-users and communities to reflect on the brand relevance and purpose of an HEI. Overton-de Klerk (2016:7) concludes her conceptual article by stating that only when a higher education brand has found their niche and purpose that adds value to society, should their attention be placed on building an international reputation.

Rengel et al. (2017) explored the communication factors among distance learning undergraduate students that influence customer loyalty at an Ecuadorian university. Using a mixed-method approach, surveys and in-depth interviews were used to explore the phenomena at hand (Rengel et al., 2017:756). The study found that students had a 66% satisfaction level regarding processes and services at their university (Rengel et al., 2017:761). Conclusions from the study found that loyalty was linked to the attention and the perceptions that students have of the values of an institution. The study suggests that HEIs need to personalise induction programmes to communicate an institution's identity and culture. The aim of these programmes should thus create a sense of belonging and tailor communication and experiences to consider the different student profiles registered for distance learning programmes (Rengel et al., 2017:761).

Mohamad et al. (2017) examined the extent to which employee brand support links to corporate identity management in the Malaysian higher education sector. In their study, Mohamad et al. (2017:186) surveyed 472 academic staff from Malaysian public universities. Findings from the study suggested that aspects of corporate identity management were critical to employees and thus affected their brand support behaviour. Furthermore, the study found that relationship communication regarding employee brand support was essential. The study, therefore, showcases the importance of academic staff's perceptions when corporate identity strategies or employee development programmes are developed inside an organisation (Mohamad et al., 2017:190).

A study by Lee et al. (2018) explored the extent to which strategic communication constructs such as identity and image influence parents of prospective students at universities in the United States. Surveys were completed by 314 parents using a database (Lee et al., 2018:316). The study found a link between internal stakeholders' judgement and parents' perceptions of HEIs. Furthermore, the study found that parents had a favourable attitude towards institutions when there was a match between image and identity. Lee et al. (2018:32) maintain that identity plays a more significant role than the image in the minds of stakeholders. The study thus found that university rankings did not matter as much as great employee and internal relations.

A study conducted by Hadji (2022) explored the role of senior-level communication practitioners in the South African higher education context. A qualitative approach was followed, and interviews were held with seven communication practitioners and three university planners from seven South African universities (Hadji, 2022:116). This study found that communication practitioners in HEIs were not integrated into university management and could, therefore, not assist management as environmental scanners, which could provide management with intelligence regarding dynamic environments. The study also found that the role of strategic communication in the context of higher education is still very ill-defined, and thus communication practitioners could not contribute meaningfully to strategic management processes (Hadji, 2022:128).

Based on the articles identified through the systematic literature review, identity, image and reputation in the higher education context need to be reconceptualised within a strategic communication perspective, as proposed by Overton-de Klerk (2016). From the viewpoint of Rengel et al. (2017), Mohamed et al. (2017) and Lee et al. (2018), it would be advisable for HEIs to take a more stakeholder-orientated approach to identity and image in the higher education context. Thus, the idea of students, alumni, university staff and local communities co-creating HEI brands is becoming increasingly important. However, as Hadji (2022) found, the role of strategic communication practitioners working in the higher education context would have to be better defined and reconceptualised to be able to add value to HEIs. This means that strategic communication practitioners need to be integrated more into management meetings to advise management more strategically regarding information and insights from stakeholders and the environment. Strategic communication practitioners thus need to be able to consult management to better identify the opportunities for co-creation with stakeholders regarding identity, image and reputation.

Higher education and brand advocacy

Only three articles were identified regarding brand advocacy in higher education. A study by Karunanayaka et al. (2019) explored the importance of behaviour, self-brand connection and brand prominence in affecting private higher education students' advocacy behaviour. This conceptual article explores how HEIs should involve students in internal branding efforts to establish and maintain relationships with students to co-create the HEI's brand to ultimately become brand advocates. By doing this, students can create positive word-of-mouth and defend or represent the brand if needed. Despite the contributions of this article, there was no empirical evidence to support the claims by Karunanayaka et al. (2019). The study also lacked depth regarding the theoretical foundations of brand advocacy.

Conversely, Dass et al. (2021) argue that HEIs, especially business schools, are functioning in a very competitive market regarding marketing and branding. Owing to this competitiveness, they conducted research to explore drivers of brand loyalty and advocacy by identifying the connections between experience, love and trust in the context of business schools. In their study, 298 respondents completed a questionnaire from five different business schools in India (Dass et al. 2021:31). This study found that affective, sensory and intellectual brand experiences could indirectly affect brand trust mediated through brand love. The study found that brand experiences, usually short-lived, should lead to significant increases in brand love to impact brand trust positively. The article thus found the connectedness of the concepts of brand experience, trust and love, despite these concepts being distinct from one another (Dass et al. 2021:35). This study argues that business schools need to create intellectually stimulating learning environments through teaching and learning with an involved faculty that facilitates the intellectual brand experience to motivate students towards brand advocacy.

Similarly, Samala and Singh (2019:2) explored millennial brand engagement with self-concept, brand love and brand advocacy for fashion brands. For this study, Samala and Singh (2019:6) received 621 responses from university students at a specific university through their quantitative questionnaire. It is important to note that the context of this study is only partially focused on the higher education context. However, this study was included due to the focus on university students. This study found that brand engagement with consumers' self-concept plays a mediating role in brand love and advocacy. Furthermore, this study indicated that involvement within a brand would increase brand love, which would increase further involvement. This study found that brand love and high levels of involvement in purchase decisions affect customer engagement with the brand and the extent to which they relate the brand back to their self-concept. This study also found that the more subjective a customer's knowledge of a brand, the more brand engagement with self-concept would occur. This could lead to advocacy behaviour due to higher knowledge levels (Samala & Singh, 2019:6). Despite the focus on fashion brands, this study also enables researchers to identify behavioural patterns of students that may provide crucial theoretical insight into how students could be advocates of university brands. By creating opportunities for brand engagement with self-concept, university brands could increase brand love.

The articles above found that brand advocacy by students may provide a competitive advantage to higher education brands. However, internal branding may be required to build and maintain relationships with students and to co-create the brand to achieve that. By doing this, more brand experiences could be created for students, increasing brand love and trust. This would enable students to be advocates of brands, as more profound engagement with a brand could influence students' self-concepts. The following two themes focus more on the theoretical developments of strategic communication and strategic integrated communication in academia and practice in general, rather than the higher education context.

Strategic communication and higher education

No studies were found that linked the theoretical foundations of personal branding, brand advocacy and strategic communication. However, six studies were identified that explored the theoretical foundations of strategic communication using the keywords strategic communication and higher education. Two studies were also identified that combined the keywords strategic communication and strategic integrated communication. Although strategic communication has already been explained in the context of higher education earlier in this article, this section touches more on theoretical developments in the strategic communication paradigm. Based on the analysis of the literature, five themes arose.

The first theme identified focuses on meaning creation when communicating strategically. In an article written by Botan and Soto (1998), the assumptions that publics are reactive when exposed to strategic communication were questioned. This conceptual article argues that a semiotic approach to strategic communication should be taken, in which logic, grammar and rhetoric act together to provide an unlimited semiosis. In this regard, semiosis refers to the process in which a message's interpretation ascribes meaning to a message. Thus, meaning is not something designed by the creator of a message, nor does it lie in the message itself (Botan & Soto, 1998:35). This process of semiosis helps publics to generate their own identity (Botan & Soto, 1998:38). This article thus provides theoretical insight into the meaning-making processes that stakeholders go through when engaging in strategic communication.

The second theme that was evident from the systematic literature review focuses on creating a more meaningful consumer experience. In a study by Tsai (2005), a holistic consumer experience management framework that combines perspectives of strategic communication and brand management was conceptualised. The holistic consumer experience management framework transcends traditional marketing approaches by viewing customers as emotional beings in search of self-identity, social groups and culture. In this framework, Tsai (2005:439) maintains that brand managers need to consider not just the consumers' basic needs, but their hearts and minds, by viewing the consumer as more than just a client. Marketing experience can be constructed to create a holistic experience. In this framework, the synergy between departments is also encouraged to think holistically about the consumer experience from different departmental perspectives. Thus, all departments need to consider the consumer's expectations, aspirations and fantasies (Tsai, 2005:440).

The third theme that emerged from the review focuses on the conceptualisation of the Pretoria School of Thought (De Beer et al., 2013). From this perspective, researchers at the University of Pretoria focused on the management and governance of communication at a strategic organisational level, while including multidisciplinary concepts such as sustainability and corporate governance in institutionalisation (De Beer et al. 2013:319). It is clear from this theme that the Pretoria School of Thought provides a particular and narrow communication management perspective that is based on research conducted at the University of Pretoria.

The fourth theme that arose from the systematic literature review focuses on the conceptualisation of the emergent strategic communication paradigm. Two articles and one textbook were identified that explored the conceptualisation of the strategic communication paradigm. The first was an article from Zerfass et al. (2018), which critically explores the state of strategic communication that will help scholars and practitioners to expand on the existing body of knowledge on strategic communication. This article argues that one of the obstacles to developing strategic communication lies in the fragmented focus of different research within this discipline. Zerfass et al. (2018:502) advocate a shared language by integrating existing and new perspectives on communication to transcend common sense through scientific principles. Adding to the ideas of Zerfass et al. (2018), Werder et al. (2018) maintain that there has been an increase in productivity among researchers in the strategic communication discipline. Despite this increase in publications, Werder et al. (2018:333) propose definitional refinements to strategic communication to increase interdisciplinary research linked to strategic communication in order to strengthen the consistency and purpose of future research and theory building on strategic communication. Werder et al. (2018:349) advocate a more integrated and holistic view of communication to develop interdisciplinary concepts and frameworks that are linked to strategic communication. This led to a collective textbook by various strategic communication scholars. Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2020) served as editors of a collective handbook on strategic communication from a multidisciplinary perspective. In their work, they maintain that communication lies at the centre of society and, therefore, how communication is enacted in all types of organisations (for-profit, non-profit, government, political parties, etc.) based on power and interest needs to be explored (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2020:xx). This work provides insights into the different metatheoretical approaches to strategic communication, organisational variables affecting strategic communication, communication from strategic communicators with stakeholders, and different areas of practice in strategic communication. The contributors in Holtzhausen and Zerfass's (2020) handbook provide a redefinition of the strategic communication paradigm by providing theoretical and empirical evidence from a strategic communication perspective to redefine the paradigm of strategic communication.

The final theme that arose from the systematic literature review is the role of the Global Capability Framework that provides a professional development structure and guideline for professionals and post-graduate students working as strategic communication practitioners in industry (Benecke et al., 2021:143). The aim of this study was to determine the adoption of the Global Capability Framework in South Africa. This study sampled 10 practitioners and academics from the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa's membership database, based on their roles and experience levels. A qualitative research approach was followed to conduct interviews with five academics and five professionals to explore the viability of the

Global Capability Framework. This study found that a guiding framework for industry and academia is needed due to the complexity of the environments in which these professionals' function. The study further found that although the value of and need for the Global Capability Framework were identified, there was a limited application in industry (Benecke et al., 2021:155). Furthermore, the study highlighted the need for more collaboration between academia and industry, and how they should use change leadership to address challenges brought about by dynamic and changing environments. The final findings of this article highlight the importance of a transformational mindset, the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and, finally, the role of digital platforms in the fourth industrial revolution to facilitate stakeholder engagement (Benecke et al., 2021:156). This article provides important insights into the skills required by communication practitioners to adequately guide organisations to strategically communicate.

Despite the existing theory regarding strategic communication, there has been a strong move towards multi- and interdisciplinary research in strategic communication. What is essential about this move is that research on strategic communication should strive towards redefining the discipline by constructing new theories and frameworks on strategic communication. The Routledge Handbook for Strategic Communication by Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2020) provides theoretical and empirical research that adds value to the paradigm of strategic communication. In line with this thinking, Benecke et al. (2021) advocate applying the Global Capability Framework to provide guidelines for communication professionals in South Africa. From the findings in this section, it becomes evident that strategic communication has a good theoretical foundation, but that more empirical research is needed to build, redefine and align the conceptual foundations of strategic communication.

Strategic communication and strategic integrated communication

Two articles were identified through the systematic literature review. Both of these articles have a solid theoretical focus linked to strategic integrated communication.

Barker (2013) asserts that integrated marketing communication has been continuously challenged within the emerging paradigm of strategic communication. In her article, Barker advocates re-orientating a strategic perspective that focuses more on strategic integrated communication. Barker (2013:118) maintains that the move to strategic integrated communication could not be ascribed to theoretical foundational changes, but primarily due to the changing digital environment in which stakeholders' function. Barker (2013:119) calls for an alternative perspective to communication through which an organisation considers the various integrated dimensions of media and the dynamic changes brought about by changing environments in which organisations function. The conclusion is that strategic integrated communication requires future studies to build on the concept and enhance scholars' understanding of the paradigmatic changes that emerge from the strategic communication paradigm.

In 2014, Niemann-Struweg built on the narrative of strategic integrated communication by publishing an article based on the model she conceptualised in 2005 for her doctoral thesis. Niemann-Struweg's (2014:191) article based on her 2005 South African Model for Strategic Integrated Communication is premised on two principles, namely 1) the organisation's strategic intent should direct that communication integration, and 2) the broader environment in which an organisation functions should be considered when repositioning the organisation. Niemann-Struweg (2014:191) further contends that integration should also occur in three areas: organisational integration, stakeholder integration and environmental integration. The article provides a significant contribution as it builds on existing models of integrated communication, but also aims to address barriers to integrated communication not considered by prior models.

From the articles above, research on strategic communication concerning strategic integrated communication has been limited. Despite the alternative perspective that Barker (2013) suggests, only Niemann-Struweg (2014) has explored the theoretical foundations of strategic integrated communication in the for-profit sector. However, these foundations of strategic integrated communication were mainly inspired by Niemann's South African model conceptualised in 2005 for her doctoral thesis. Due to the limited amount of research articles available, strategic integrated communication has not been successfully adopted as a research topic, unlike strategic communication. Despite the focus on strategic communication as a paradigm, strategic integrated communication could provide relevant theoretical insights that may be relevant to HEIs in South Africa.

KEY CONCLUSIONS

Based on the discussions in the section above, Table 3 provides key conclusions of the research trends and gaps currently found in literature in relation to strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, brand advocacy and personal branding in relation to the higher education context.

Table 3: Trends, gaps and proposed arguments

Trend	Gap	Proposed argument
Interactions with various brand contact points affect stakeholder perceptions of HEI's identity, image and reputation.	The complexity of stakeholders in HEIs about their identity, image and reputation needs exploration. This is despite the emphasis on co-creation and stakeholder-centredness.	Students and alumni affect the brand identity of HEIs. Therefore, an integration of the theoretical foundations of strategic communication, personal branding and brand advocacy may be required.
Brand love, loyalty, trust and advocacy behaviour are affected by stakeholder experiences and their involvement with an HEI brand.	HEIs display insufficient efforts to create brand experiences that should lead to increased brand involvement and that may strengthen the advocacy behaviour of students and alumni.	Strategic communication can increase brand advocacy during a student's university career. The theoretical foundations of strategic communication thus may need to consider brand love, experience, loyalty and trust to increase advocacy behaviour in HEI.
Personal branding is essential to students, and they view it as the responsibility of HEIs to help develop their personal brands.	The implications of student personal brands, or the lack thereof, are not fully researched concerning HEI brand identity, image and reputation. In addition, the role and connection of HEIs to strategically align students' brands to HEI brands requires exploration.	Personal brands of students and alumni can positively or negatively affect HEIs' identity, image and reputation. Thus, the theoretical foundations of personal branding may need to be explored from a strategic communication perspective to identify how HEIs could help to better position students concerning their brand.
The Global Capability Framework can guide the personal development of communication practitioners.	Despite the complexity associated with communication in HEIs and the skills and knowledge of practitioners, there is a tendency to disregard the strategic contributions that communication practitioners could make.	The role of the communication practitioner in HEI institutions needs exploration considering the strategic communication paradigm. Furthermore, Niemann's Model of Strategic Integrated Communication should be revisited in relation to strategic communication and the HEI context, as it emphasises the practitioner's advisory role to management.
The strategic communication paradigm attempts to create a shared language between researchers by developing interdisciplinary concepts and models.	There is a gap in strategic communication research regarding the brand advocate role that stakeholders could play within complex communicative environments. Furthermore, existing research has not explored the responsibility of strategic communication to contribute to individuals' identity and personal brand development.	Through their communication with organisations, stakeholders could shape the organisations' strategic intent and brand. At the same time, through strategic communication, organisations could contribute to individuals' social identity and personal brand. Personal branding as an interdisciplinary concept needs further development from a strategic communication and brand advocacy perspective.

Strategic integrated communication has created opportunities for communication integration due to the changing digital environment.	There is limited research on implementing strategic integrated communication within the literature. Furthermore, Niemann's 2005 model is one of few models that provides insights into implementing strategic integrated communication in the for-profit sector in South Africa. Currently, research in the literature has been focused more on the strategic communication paradigm.	There is an opportunity to revisit the theoretical foundations of SIC and Niemann's 2005 For-profit Model of SIC to incorporate the new perspectives brought about by the strategic communication paradigm. Furthermore, Niemann's model may need to be adapted further for the higher education context to support the brand advocacy behaviour of students and alumni. This would require co-creation between HEI brands and student/alumni brands to align their brand identity, image and reputation.

The trends in Table 3, identified through the systematic literature review, indicate that current research mainly focuses on strategic communication, personal branding and, to some extent, brand advocacy. Furthermore, the systematic literature review highlighted the increased focus on the theoretical development of the strategic communication paradigm and showed the limited research on strategic integrated communication. Despite the relevant contextual literature on strategic communication, personal branding and brand advocacy, research on these concepts seems to be conducted in silos with limited integration of their theoretical foundations when researching HEIs. Similarly, strategic communication and strategic integrated communication tend not to explore dimensions of personal branding or brand advocacy in their theoretical foundations. Although these concepts are independent theoretical constructs, integrating them could add value to theory and communication practice in different contexts. In the context of higher education, combining the theoretical foundations of strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, personal branding and brand advocacy could contribute to navigating the strategic complexities caused by stakeholders, specifically students and alumni, in HEIs.

CONCLUSION

The study posed the research question: What are the main research trends in strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, brand advocacy and personal branding within the context of higher education? To answer this question, a systematic literature review was conducted on the research trends in strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, personal branding and brand advocacy in higher education. The systematic literature review found that limited studies focused on combining the concepts above in their titles and abstracts. In some cases, only combinations of two keywords were found in titles and abstracts. Furthermore, the eligibility screening articles were divided into contextual and theoretical categories. Contextually, personal branding had been researched the most in the context of higher education, followed by strategic communication and, finally, brand advocacy. Despite the research articles identified, there is further opportunity to research the concepts of strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, personal branding and brand advocacy in higher education, due to the absence of overlap between these concepts from a theoretical perspective.

Based on the current lack of theoretical and contextual integration between concepts (strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, personal branding and brand advocacy in higher education), as evident in the trends and gaps in the literature, future research should explore the communicative complexities regarding identity, image and reputation created by stakeholders such as students and alumni transitioning from internal to external stakeholders. In addition, future research should explore what HEIs are doing to align student and alumni brands to HEI brands to communicate a consistent brand message through advocacy behaviour. Similarly, the perceptions of students and alumni regarding brand-building initiatives may need to be explored to understand how the HEI brand affects their personal brand development and advocacy behaviour.

The value of this future research is based on the ability of students and alumni to positively or negatively influence HEIs' identity, image and reputation through their behaviour. As stakeholders, they play a vital role in positioning and representing HEIs on a micro level in their communities and industry. Communication practitioners in HEIs can thus incorporate students and alumni in brand-building initiatives through brand advocacy. However, students and alumni also have their own identities, which may contradict the identity of the HEI brand. Furthermore, the credibility of the social identity of students or alumni as articulated through their personal brand may also affect the success of advocacy behaviour. Strategic communication is thus required to position students' and alumni's personal brands to serve as brand advocates who can strengthen an HEI's identity, image and reputation. In addition, communication practitioners and higher education management should create communicative opportunities to align students and alumni with the HEI brand identity. By creating these opportunities, HEI brands, through co-creation, may redefine their strategic intent by adapting to environmental and stakeholder expectations. Through this interaction, strategic integrated communication may occur by not only redefining the strategy of the HEI, but also aligning HEI brand messages with messages communicated by students and alumni in communities and industries. However, guiding models and frameworks may be required to support HEIs in implementing strategic communication.

REFERENCES

Allison, L., Blair, J., Jin Ho, J. & Boutin Jr, P.J. (2020). The impact and mediating role of personal brand authenticity on the self-actualization of university graduates entering the workforce. J*ournal for Advancement of Marketing Education*, 28(2):3–13.

Anderson, V. & Tomlinson, M. (2021). Signaling standout graduate employability: The employer perspective. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 31(3):675–693. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12334

Balaji, M.S., Roy, S.K. & Sadeque, S. (2016). Antecedents and consequences of university brand identification. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(8):3023–3032. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.01.017

Barker, R. (2013). Strategic integrated communication: An alternative perspective of integrated marketing communication? *Communicatio*, 39(1):102–121. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2013.741071

Benecke, D.R., Muir, C., Porthen, D., Van Wyk, H. & Du Plessis, N.M. (2021). The role of the global capability framework within the strategic communication profession in an emerging post COVID-19 context: A South African perspective. *ESSACHESS – Journal for communication studies*, 14(1):137–159. Available from: https://essachess.com/3/index.php/jcs/article/view/141

Botan, C.H. & Soto, F. (1998). A semiotic approach to the internal functioning of publics: Implications for strategic communication and public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 24(1):21–44. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(98)80018-0

Choi, Y., Kroff, M.W. & Kim, J. (2021). Developing brand advocacy through brand activities on Facebook. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 38(3):328–338. Available from: https://dx.doi.org/10.1108/jcm-10-2019-3460

Dass, S., Popli, S., Sarkar, J. G., & Vinay, M. (2021). Empirically examining the psychological mechanism of a loved and trusted business school brand. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 31(1):23–40. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2020.1742846

de Beer, E., Steyn, B. & Rensburg, R. (2013). The Pretoria school of thought: From strategy to governance and sustainability. In *Public Relations and Communication Management*: Current Trends and Emerging Topics. New York: Taylor and Francis, 303–323.

Dean, D., Arroyo-Gamez, R.E., Punjaisri, K. & Pich, C. (2016). Internal brand co-creation: The experiential brand meaning cycle in higher education. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(8):3041–3048. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.01.019

Escalas, J.E. (2004). Narrative processing: Building consumer connections to brands. *Journal of consumer Psychology*, 14(1–2):168–180. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1401&2_19

Ferraro, R., Kirmani, A. & Matherly, T. (2013). Look at me! Look at me! Conspicuous brand usage, self-brand connection, and dilution. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 50(4):477–488. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.11.0342

Gander, M. (2014). Managing your personal brand. *Perspectives: Policy & Practice in Higher Education*, 18(3):99–102. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2014.913538

Girard, T., Pinar, M. & Lysiak, L. (2020). Understanding student perceptions of their personal branding in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 20(13):136–146. Available from: http://www.na-businesspress.com/JHETP/JHETP20-13/10_GirardFinal.pdf

Gorbatov, S., Khapova, S.N. & Lysova, E.I. (2018). Personal branding: Interdisciplinary systematic review and research agenda. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. Available from: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02238

Gujarathi, R. & Kulkarni, S. (2018). Understanding personal branding perceptions through intentions. *BVIMSR Journal of Management Research*, 10(2):207–217. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Thiruvenkadam-Thiagarajan/publication/331036367_Organizational_Climate_for_Innovation_and_Creativity/links/5c6293d7299bf1d14cbfbcce/Organizational-Climate-for-Innovation-and-Creativity.pdf#page=79

Hadji, M.J. (2022). Analysing the strategic role of communication practitioners in South African universities. *Communicatio*. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2022.2086593

Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Verčič, D. & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(1):3–35. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/15531180701285244

Hemsley-Brown, J., Melewar, T.C., Nguyen, B. & Wilson, E.J. (2016). Exploring brand identity, meaning, image, and reputation (BIMIR) in higher education: A special section. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(8):3019–3022. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.01.016

Holtzhausen, D. & Zerfass, A. (2020). *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

Ilies, V.I. (2018). Strategic personal branding for students and young professionals. *Cross-Cultural Management Journal*, 20(1):43–51. Available from: https://seaopenresearch.eu/Journals/articles/CMJ2018_I1_6.pdf

Karunanayaka, D.C., Arokiasamy, L. & Masri, R. (2019). The effect of perceived value-in-use in student advocacy behavior of private higher education institution in Malaysia: A conceptual framework. Global Business and Management Research, 11(1):407–418. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20185602001

Khedher, M. (2019). Conceptualizing and researching personal branding effects on the employability. *Journal of Brand Management*, 26(2):99–109. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-018-0117-1

Lee, Y.A., Park, H. & Cameron, G.T. (2018). Strategic communication in US higher education: Testing congruity effects of university identity and image among parents of prospective students. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(3):308–327. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1445091

Mohamad, B., Ismail, A.R. & Bidin, R. (2017). Corporate identity management and employee brand support: Enhancing marketisation in higher education sector. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 33(3):178–195. Available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2017-3303-11

Molares-Cardoso, J., de Aguileta, C.L. & Lago, B.L. (2020). The importance of personal branding as an element of public relations: an international experience. *Comunicacao e Sociedade*, 2020:19-35. Available from: https://doi.org/10.17231/comsoc.0(2020).2738

Niemann-Struweg, I. (2014). An integrated communication implementation model for the post-2000 business environment. *Public Relations Review*, 40(2):184–192. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.08.011

Niemann, I. (2005). *Strategic integrated communication implementation: Towards a South African conceptual model*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.

Overton-de Klerk, N. & Sienaert, M. (2016). From research excellence to brand relevance : A model for higher education reputation building. *South African Journal of Science*, 112(5):47–54. Available from: https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2016/20150365

Pickering, C. and Byrne, J. (2014). The benefits of publishing systematic quantitative literature reviews for PhD candidates and other early-career researchers. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(3):534–548. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.841651

Rangarajan, D., Gelb, B., D. & Vandaveer, A. (2017). Strategic personal branding – And how it pays off. *Business Horizons*, 60(5):657–666. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2017.05.009

Rengel, V.K.D., Ramirez, M.E.A. & Benavides, A.V.V. (2017). Analysis of communication factors influencing customer loyalty among university students. *Revista Latina De Comunicacion Social*, 72(7):751–764. Available from: http://www.revistalatinacs.org/072paper/1190/40en.html

Samala, N. & Singh, S. (2019). Millennial's engagement with fashion brands. A moderated-mediation model of brand engagement with self-concept, involvement and knowledge. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 23(1):2–16. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-04-2018-0045

Shepherd, I.D.H. (2005). From cattle and coke to Charlie: Meeting the challenge of self-marketing and personal branding. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 21(5-6):589–606. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1362/0267257054307381

Tsai, S.P. (2005). Integrated marketing as management of holistic consumer experience. *Business Horizons*, 48(5):431–441. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2005.02.005

Verwey, S. & Benecke, D.R. (2021). Paradigms, perspectives and paradoxes. In S. Verwey, D.R. Benecke T. Phumo, T. (eds). *Strategic communication: South African perspectives*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 5–32.

Werder, K.P., Nothhaft, H., Verčič, D. & Zerfass, A. (2018). Strategic communication as an emerging interdisciplinary paradigm. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4):333–351. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1494181

Xiao, Y. & Watson, M. (2019). Guidance on conducting a systematic literature review. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 39(1):93–112. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X17723971

Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Nothhaft, H. & Werder, K.P. (2018). Strategic communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4):487–505. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485

Theory vs Practice: Perceptions of Professionalisation in Strategic Communication Education

AUTHOR(S)
María R. Carreras
Halmstad University, Sweden
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3773-8378
Jörgen Eksell
Lund University, Sweden
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9602-6998
Marja Åkeström
Lund University, Sweden
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5289-6775
Howard Nothhaft
Lund University, Sweden
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4576-6205

PUBLISHED ONLINE
Volume 44 (1) May 2025
Pages 56-73
Submitted January 2024
Accepted March 2025

DOI
10.36615/t859xs40

ISSN
Online 2957-7950
Print 0259-0069

Abstract
This research examines the professionalisation of strategic communication as a teaching discipline by exploring perceived tensions within the subject. Higher education is a "battleground" for both professions and would-be professions, and the study offers a deeper understanding of the dynamic tensions shaping the professionalisation process of this discipline. However, there has been limited research in this area within strategic communication. This study is based on qualitative interviews with 25 programme directors of international master's programmes and leading academics from various parts of the world. The empirical findings show that the interviewees perceive the tension between theory and practice as crucial. Some educational programmes prioritise theory to provide students with a profound understanding of fundamental principles, whereas others emphasise practice to enhance employability and practical skills. The study shows that the perceived dichotomy theory and practice in master's programmes is oversimplified and involves several nuances and distinctions. The research provides greater insight into how tensions surrounding professionalism arise in emerging fields at the university level, particularly in disciplines that are still establishing their position and trajectory. Furthermore, it raises new questions about how university systems and traditions affect professionalisation processes.

Keywords
Higher education, master's programmes, professionalisation, professionalisation processes, strategic communication, theory–practice tension

INTRODUCTION
Over the past 40 years, particularly since the publication of Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner* in 1983 and Abbott's *A System of Professions* in 1988, research on professionalisation has expanded significantly (see, for example, Collins, 1990). While medicine and law remain the classic models of professions, a comprehensive understanding of the subject must now also consider "semi-professional occupations", such as social work and nursing, as well as "would-be professions" (Hudson, 1978) that include managers, journalists, advertisers and communicators.

However, this broadening of the concept of professions also brings a critical aspect to light. As sociological perspectives on professionalisation have become more complex and open-ended, the very purpose of professional structures has come under scrutiny. In 2007, Noordegraaf observed that professionalisation had become an almost universal aspiration: "Nowadays, indeed, almost everyone wants to become professional, and professional associations have popped up everywhere" (2007:761–762). He provides numerous examples, which vary in plausibility, stating, "Financial planners, information technology workers, biotechnologists, architects, journalists, designers, translators – even cartoonists, body piercers, and pet sitters portray and organize themselves as professionals" (2007:762).

At the same time, Noordegraaf notes that traditional professions, such as medicine, are experiencing a decline in the substantial autonomy that once characterised them. For instance, many physicians are now employed by large bureaucratic organisations, and health insurance companies often control financial resources, resulting in the medical profession being increasingly subject to non-medical influences.

Echoing Abbott, Collins and other sceptical authors, critical management scholar Mats Alvesson (2022) suggests that occupations continue to imitate prestigious classic professions, even when unwarranted. The reason is quite simply that perception as a profession gives status regardless of whether it is warranted. "It is not so much a question of the work characteristics themselves or the knowledge base of a profession (or a wannabe profession); rather, the significant point is the ability to organize and mobilize a powerful political project to gain acceptance for claims to having special status" (Alvesson, 2022:266).

This article explores the professionalisation of strategic communication within the context of newer, more complex and often critical perspectives. We are particularly interested in how professionalisation serves as a strategy for our discipline in education, especially when considered against the backdrop of "credential inflation" (Collins, 2002). With a potential crisis in higher education on the horizon, we are focused on the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in this discussion.

How does the discourse of strategic communication as an academic discipline integrate with the practitioner discourse of strategic communicators as highly skilled professionals with a distinct occupational culture, scientific knowledge base, unique code of ethics, etc.? The question is relevant in the context of strategic communication's disciplinary discourses. Since the 10-year anniversary of the inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, significant efforts have been made to clarify the scope and boundaries of the discipline – debating whether it even qualifies as a "discipline" (see, for example, Hallahan et al., 2007; Nothhaft et al., 2018; Overton-de Klerk, 2023; Werder et al., 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018). Despite substantial reflection on disciplinary matters, empirical studies focusing on strategic communication as an applied communication discipline and its place in higher education remain limited. While bibliometric analyses of journal publications have addressed the research aspect (see, for example, Werder et al. 2018), the teaching dimension is still not well understood. In essence, we need more knowledge about what is taught, how it is taught and by whom within the headline "Strategic Communication".

Studies focusing on professionalisation have been conducted in the subfields that strategic communication seeks to unite, that is, in public relations, organisational communication, marketing, political communication, public diplomacy and crisis communication (cf. Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). Interestingly, given the ridicule heaped on body piercers and pet sitters, some public relations authors treat their occupations self-evidently as professions. Perhaps with some justification, due to the status of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) in the United Kingdom, Anne Gregory's study (2011) comes with a confident title: The state of the public relations profession in the UK: A review of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

It should have become clear by now that we do not approach our subject similarly but associate with the critical approach outlined by L'Etang (2008) and Bridgen (2017), who view the professionalisation project from the sidelines. While strategic communication can be fairly characterised as a "would-be profession" or, in Alvesson's words, a "wannabe profession", we do not make any attempt to elevate the status of strategic communication (Andersson et al., 2023). We are not so much interested in whether strategic communication is a profession or finding reasons that it should be. Our interest lies in the question of on what grounds the discipline lays claim to professional status. Or, more precisely, on what grounds do academics researching and teaching in strategic communication lay claim to educating professionals as opposed to mere practitioners? Thus, our study explores the perceptions of programme directors, department heads and professors.

Phrases such as "lay claim" reveal that our view of professional processes aligns closely with those of Noordegraaf (2007) and Alvesson (2022), perhaps minus the polemics. Professional status is not viewed as a matter of ticking boxes but as a political process, that is, a continuous tacit negotiation of choices based on individual–collective perceptions of tensions, which are collectively interpreted (cf. Foucault, 1971/1981) and eventually result in the formation of curricula. For public relations, L'Etang (2008) clearly acknowledges that the development of professions is related to societal ideals and norms. Professionalisation studies have acknowledged the connection between professionalisation, society and culture (see, for example, Kultgren 1998, cited in Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). Education for professions has also been labelled a site of struggles containing several tensions (Tobias, 2003). To this end, in this research, professionalisation education is treated as a negotiated process through expressions of norms, values and activities (cf. Rosen, 2014).

THEORETICAL APPROACH AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Professionalisation

Research on professionalisation has been underpinned by three main approaches. The first approach focused on the *traits* or *attributes* that distinguished professions from other occupations. In a 1964 review study, Millerson identified 23 significant criteria for professions (Millerson, 1964, cited in Tobias, 2003). Alvesson, who claims that these criteria are still being imitated, enumerates the essential 11 (2022:263):

- It is based on systematic, scientifically based theory.
- There is a long and standardised formal education.
- There is a strong professional association regulating its members.
- Members have autonomy in the sense that professional knowledge rather than bureaucratic positions should govern decisions and work within the professional sphere.
- A code of ethics is established by the profession.
- There is a distinct occupational culture.
- There is a client orientation.
- The occupation is socially sanctioned and authorised.
- There are criteria for certification.
- There is a monopoly of a particular labour market via restrictions of entry.
- Collective self-regulation and the professional have authority over work.

The trait approach came under critical scrutiny in the 1970s. Apart from the fact that a strict application left only physicians and veterinarians (and perhaps dentists and psychologists), opponents argued that the assumption that static attributes represent a profession was not valid. Therefore, researchers such as Houle (1981) argued for a second, dynamic approach focusing on the process of professionalisation. He suggested that three sets of characteristics – conceptual, performance and collective identity – could be the basis for all vocations and their journey towards professionalisation. In that sense, education is seen more optimistically in this approach than in the previous. One influential researcher who made significant contributions to this tradition is Schön (1983), who, among other things, studied the professionalisation processes of non-professions, such as nurses. He problematised many of the struggles that new or would-be professions encountered during the transition towards professionalisation – an aspect of great interest in this study. A dynamic approach to professionalisation has influenced this study. The approach is helpful in education and professionalisation as it acknowledges the struggles that shape a discipline's evolution.

Lastly, a third approach to professionalisation has evolved, mainly inspired by neo-Marxism and neo-Weberian perspectives and studies on late and new capitalism. For instance, Johnson (1972) argues that the professionalisation of occupations should primarily be regarded as a mode of control. Another influential researcher in this approach is Larson (1990), who explores the role of scientific knowledge and training as a control mechanism for the professionalisation of occupations. Alvesson's polemical renderings largely take their cue from this perspective.

Professionalism as an occupational value

Intimately related to the concept of professionalisation is professionalism. The latter has an internal focus and encompasses a range of behaviours, attitudes and criteria that individuals exhibit in their work (Brante, 2011). Professionalism studies generally focus on professionalism as a distinctive mode of work and practitioner control in public sector service work (see, for example, Freidson, 2001). However, the field of professionalism is changing and now incorporates studies on professionals in large-scale organisational workplaces and occasionally in international companies. Another aspect of professionalism concerns a shared common professional identity. Members of occupations, such as lawyers and teachers, have a common understanding of their profession (cf. Andersson et al., 2023). This article provides insights into strategic communication work and norms related to how strategic communication professionals are expected to perform their work. Further, it also shows how these affect universities' development of educational programmes.

Professionalisation in the communication sector

Research on professionalisation in the communication sector originated in studies on communication roles in the 1970s, leading to several role classifications and structural models. For example, the four-role typology framework created by Broom and Smith in 1979 was later expanded by Broom and Dozier (1986). Dozier later reduced this model into two roles: the manager and the technician (Simonsson & Heide, 2021). This role division has, in turn, also been criticised by researchers as the two roles are intimately related to each other in practice and are often performed simultaneously (Simonsson & Heide, 2021). Some scholars have pointed out limitations in understanding the concepts of management (Moss et al., 2005) and strategic aspects (Zerfass & Volk, 2018), which has prompted a broader discussion (Nothhaft & Zerfass, 2023).

In the conversation on roles, there is also the discussion about the profession's reputation. Several scholars, including Grunig (1992), Grunig and Hunt (1984) and Grunig et al. (2002), as well as Cutlip et al. (2000), have argued that the field's focus on tactics and techniques should shift towards emphasising management and strategy to improve its standing. A study among corporate communication practitioners in South Africa came to a similar conclusion (Steyn, 2000). Subsequently, Tindall and Holtzhausen (2011) proposed four generic communication roles: strategist, media specialist, liaison and cultural interpreter. However, as Falkheimer et al. (2016) argue, a strict division between these roles is not easily discernible in practice. Similarly, Månsson and Eksell (2024) note that communication roles tend to expand and change in extraordinary circumstances. Furthermore, some researchers criticise the emphasis on role enactment and question the value of role mappings for the professionalisation of the occupation. They also suggest observing the role-making process from a micro-perspective (cf. Frandsen & Johansen, 2015; Simonsson & Heide, 2021).

Many studies on professionalisation have been performed from the reference point of public relations by referring to the Excellence project by Grunig (1992) and colleagues, where gaining access to the dominant coalition is seen as a vital factor to increased status and professionalisation (cf. Simonsson & Heide, 2021). In turn, many scholars criticised this perspective as being too focused on managerial logic, instrumental rationalism and organisational professionalism, and as not paying attention to power relations within the dominant coalition. Simonsson & Heide (2021) instead present a different perspective that stresses the independence of the communication practitioner from managerial logic. Instead, they advocate a communicative logic that embraces the quality of relationships with various stakeholders and values, such as meaningfulness, participation, cocreation, trust and legitimacy (Simonsson & Heide, 2021). Most of the reviewed studies above refer to public relations, while a few aim to advance the new and emerging field of strategic communication. Considering these complexities, it sounds reasonable that students preparing for communication careers should receive an education that mirrors the multifaceted nature of the profession. Based on the problematisation in the introduction and the literature review above and an ambition to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic tensions shaping the discipline's professionalisation, two research questions were established to guide the empirical exploration:

> RQ1: What dynamic tensions are perceived by programme directors, professors and departments in the educational developmental process of master's programmes in strategic communication in different parts of the world?
>
> RQ2: How does understanding these tensions impact the professionalisation processes in developing educational programmes?

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a contextual and cumulative qualitative methodology based on an inductive approach (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) and a social constructivist epistemology (Prasad, 2018). The approach allows knowledge to develop step-by-step through the researchers' analytical and reflective thinking. The inductive characteristic entails inductive reasoning, meaning that working conceptions develop during the research process and are context-sensitive (cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). The ontological approach in this study recognises the intimate relationship between knowledge production and the conception of knowledge (cf. Dewey, 1999[1916]; Liedman, 2007) as a departure point. As such, the results implicitly relate to historical polemics on knowledge concerning theory and practice, which will be contextualised in the findings.

Qualitative sampling

The university is one of several key stakeholders – practitioners, users and states – involved in developing professions (Torstendahl, 1990). A university interacts with the other stakeholders and is particularly interesting to study. This study originated as an international benchmark study aiming to revise existing strategic communication programmes at a European university. As such, the work reflects universities' understanding of strategic communication education, interpretation of key stakeholders and its influence on professionalisation.

Purposive sampling was applied (cf. Patton, 2015) to find critical cases, such as influential departments, programme leaders, and academics within the field, that could shed light on various experiences and perceptions of international trategic communication programmes. A criterion sample in the form of English-speaking programmes was used to reduce the included sample.

The study builds on an analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews with programme leaders and leading academics in strategic communication. The respondents represent English-speaking master's programmes from 19 universities in Africa, Asia, Europe and North America. Two programme or subject representatives participated in three of these interviews, which comprised 25 respondents.

Data collection

The semi-structured interviews followed Brinkmann and Kvale's (2015) approach. The respondents were given substantial freedom to discuss their perspectives, which allowed for follow-up questions and cumulative knowledge. This facilitated a comprehensive exploration of subjects and provided the flexibility to capture nuances in the interviewees' viewpoints (cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The topics discussed during the interviews often revolved around the international master's programmes in which the interviewees were involved. The interviews lasted approximately one hour. Except for a few cases where in-person interviews took place, most were conducted via Zoom, a videotelephony software programme, as interviewees lived in different parts of the world.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed. A qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) was done using *NVivo*, a qualitative data analysis software. This software helped organise, manage and systematically evaluate the interview transcripts by labelling text segments that encapsulated specific concepts, themes, trends and ideas. It should be noted that many respondents used the terms undergraduate and graduate in the quotes, whereas the terms bachelor's and master's, respectively, are used in this text.

The inductive coding process in *NVivo* (cf. Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016) resulted in analytical themes (Nowell et al., 2017), going from the empirical level to broader understandings. These formed a foundation for the analysis and, through further iterative analysis, enabled the identification and exploration of perceived issues, tendencies and tensions within strategic communication programmes from an international perspective. The coding resulted in three overarching themes, six intermediate themes and many subcodes (see Figure 1).

Several significant intermediate analytical themes, including tensions highlighting the field's complexities, were discovered in the analytical coding process. Focusing on tensions in studies of professionalisation processes has previously been considered beneficial (Tobias, 2003). This article focuses on one central tension: Theory vs. practice. This tension was analytically identified as present across all overarching themes and it related to other intermediate analytical themes. Therefore, it can be regarded as the central tension in the data. Furthermore, this tension showcases the diverse opinions and challenges the respondents perceive, which are vital in shaping the professionalisation processes. By examining these, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics of professionalisation that influence strategic communication as a teaching discipline.

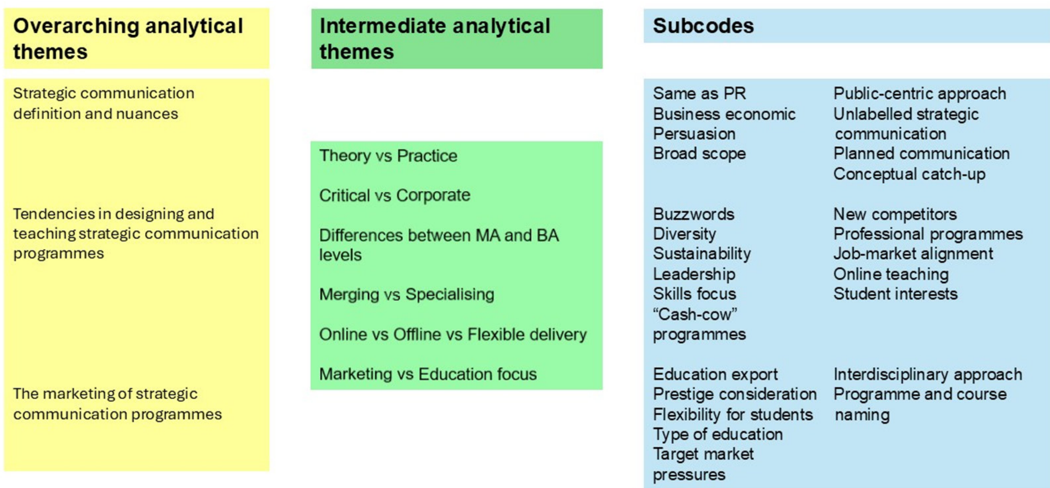

Figure 1: Overarching themes, intermediate analytical themes and subcodes

The empirical findings include quotes from the participants, who were represented anonymously to protect their professional integrity. This was regarded as an appropriate approach because the purpose was not to compare potential differences between universities on different continents. In addition, following the ethical principles outlined by the Swedish Research Council (Swedish Research Council, 2017), participants were provided with information about the research goals. Verbal consent was received from all participants and interviews were audio-recorded with permission. They were informed that the audio files would be transcribed.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The empirical findings show that interviewees perceive the dichotomy between theory and practice as the central tension shaping the professionalisation of strategic communication as an academic discipline. The interviews with teachers, programme directors and departments reveal that some master programmes prioritise theory to give students a deep understanding of fundamental principles. In contrast, others emphasise practical skills to improve students' employability. The interviews demonstrate variations in how this perceived dichotomy between theory and practice is understood, including recognising inherent tension and nuances, its impact on educational programme development and how it relates to professionalisation. In the section below, the perceptions and significance of these tensions are illustrated and discussed.

A balanced approach

In the interviews, respondents insisted on striving for a balanced approach in which theory is taught alongside practice. While applied communication disciplines are seemingly becoming more confident in their approach, the academics in this study still emphasised the importance of theory and academic grounding, especially in educational programmes at research universities. One interviewee described the relationship between theoretical and applied components as follows:

> I mean, you have to learn the theory around this, which can be connected to rhetoric or whatever. And then, of course, you also need to somehow train it a little bit, definitely. We should do both, basically, that's what I think. I don't think we should do a super theoretical version, and we should definitely not just do a practical version. We should connect them. That is what we do. [...] I would say it is 75 theory, 25 practice. It is mainly an academic education still.

Several respondents struggled to have a balanced approach at the master's level by integrating practical pedagogies and education with theory. They admitted that this approach corresponds better with students' preference for hands-on learning than theoretical approaches. Despite the faculty's recognition of the significance of theoretical foundations, deliberate efforts had sometimes been made to minimise theoretical content. Practical components are intentionally woven into every course, affording students substantial exposure to real-world applications while remaining rooted in relevant theoretical principles. A respondent elaborated on this approach:

> Our master's degree is more practical. I would say, on average, our students prefer practical education rather than theoretical. Although, as a faculty, we think it is important to have some theoretical grounding. But I will say that compared to other communication master's degrees at other universities, we probably have less theory in our courses. It just [has not been] emphasised so much [...]. We have no class that is only theory. So, every course has a practical aspect.

However, what exactly is a balanced approach? Respondents have various opinions. One respondent emphasised the importance of connecting theoretical concepts with real-life examples and demonstrating how these theories can be implemented in practice. The respondent acknowledged that there may not be a definitive correct balance. However, if students understand the purpose and relevance of their learning, they are more likely to be engaged and retain the knowledge. Other interviewees also discussed this understanding:

> 50/50 sounds great. But you know, as long as we can teach the theory and show how this is enacted, how are we going to use it? What are examples of it? I'm not sure there is a correct balance, but as long as students can see, I'm learning this because ... why? Why

> am I learning this? I think that they're going to be more receptive to it. If you just have them taking notes on theory, after theory, after theory. And then they would be like, why? They're going to lose it the second they walk out of the classroom. If we teach them the theory, give them examples, and have them utilise the theory and make strategic decision making, it's much more likely to be retained. But asking students to retain anything these days is very hard, and they usually forget. Cumulative knowledge for students is, you know, really hard to maintain these days. Like they usually will forget everything they learned the previous year, they are starting over again, scrapped.

According to another respondent, the ratio between theory and practice should be 75% theory and 25% practice, emphasising theory within the academic framework: "We should connect them. That is what we do. [...] I would say it is 75 theory, 25 practice. It is mainly an academic education still". As the interviewee explained, the aim would be to establish a balanced and interconnected relationship between theory and practice, fostering an educational, academic approach that predominantly revolves around theoretical learning, but always connected to practice.

All in all, most interviewees discussed the dynamic tension between teaching theory and practice. They described how they strive for a good balance between them, which could lead to higher educational quality. In this study, this was also interpreted as working to increase the level of professionalisation. The quotes display the dynamic quality of this tension, as seen in the subtle understanding of the imagined dichotomy and the delicacy of finding a well-balanced approach. This is assumed to impact the students' capacity to retain knowledge: presenting theories without practical context may lead to disengagement and forgetfulness among students. The discussion of cumulative knowledge emphasises how understanding the balance impacts the development of educational programmes as part of the professionalisation process.

The relationship between bachelor and master level

The interview study extended the understanding of perceived differences between theory and practice by pointing out the relations between bachelor's and master's levels and the role theories and practice play in programmes at different levels.

The respondents addressed the theory–practice tension in relation to educational levels in different ways. While some stressed the risk of lacking relevance by not teaching how theories might be applied in practice and submitted to the urge to cultivate analytical skills, others noted the importance of having curricula that admit progression between bachelor's and master's level education programmes.

Another interviewee emphasised the need for a solid theoretical foundation for bachelor's programmes and acknowledged that these programmes historically heavily emphasised theory in the early years. Admittedly, students had reportedly complained about the perceived lack of relevance of extensive theoretical content in the past.

> They used to put a lot of theory in the first year. A lot. And we complained as students, obviously. You know: Why am I studying this? It is completely irrelevant. And I can see where that criticism came from back then because we were doing theory for theory's sake. So, there was very little emphasis on application. And now we try to integrate that in our courses as well, like do not just read theory, when you are observing things every day, try to apply it. If you read about, I do not know, gender in PR [public relations], try to see how this gender plays out, not just in PR but also in your everyday life. And how can that potentially impact the industry, how can that impact public communication, how are gender stereotypes ingrained in that, etc.?

This interviewee emphasised the necessity of a solid theoretical foundation in public relations at the bachelor level. This interviewee also recognised the need to integrate theory into practice in courses by encouraging students to use theoretical concepts in real-world observations. This way, the interviewee highlighted the importance of understanding the practical implications of theoretical knowledge, especially in areas such as gender in public relations. The interviewee distinguished what they perceived as more pertinent to the bachelor and master levels, as shown in the forthcoming quote:

> So anyway, for undergraduates, I do think that they need a very strong theoretical basis. I really do think that, in public relations, in particular. I think even Aristotle was saying this with philosophy and philosophers; it is not new. But I also think they need some basic skills and a toolkit. For undergraduates, for me, it is to teach them political theory, social theory and psychology, which are really important in public relations. And then try to apply this to public relations practice, giving them the basics of public relations and ethics. So, you know, analytical skills.

According to the interviewee, an essential component of a bachelor's education is cultivating a theoretical foundation and analytical skills, suggesting a desire to foster critical abilities among students for a well-rounded and thoughtful approach.

While some interviewees stressed cultivating analytical skills, other participants understood the relationship between bachelor and master levels as progression. In the following quote, the interviewee delves into their perspective regarding the significance of critical thinking in master's programmes, highlighting its heightened importance at this level. This includes taking a critical stance on issues and actively theorising experiences, indicating a move beyond foundational knowledge towards a more advanced exploration:

> For me, postgraduate is much more concerned with critical thinking, taking a critical stance and really theorising that experience. But yeah, I have not taught undergraduate courses for a really long time now, almost 10 years. So, it is very difficult for me to say what undergraduate courses should have. I would see it more like basic versions of what we have on a postgraduate degree. And, you know, because you have more time to study things, I think at the beginning, the first year needs to be more theory based. And then, as you progress, in the second or third year, depending on how long the degree is, it can be either three or four years, then you give them a little bit more practice. And also, maybe some kind of practical research placements, or practice placements, if the curriculum allows. So, you have more time to work through this theory, practice and practical implications. Then, on the postgraduate level, it is when you have, you know, kind of critical thinking and applying that critical thinking.

The interviewee above suggested conceptualising bachelor courses as offering "basic versions" of what is covered in master's degrees, which stresses the cultivation of analytical skills. This implies a structured progression from foundational concepts at the bachelor level to more advanced, critical exploration at the master level. This way of understanding the relation between the levels – as progression – can also be interpreted as negotiable choices that are part of the professionalisation process of the teaching discipline.

Practice leads to an appreciation of theory

Contrary to the widespread belief that students prefer practical modules, some participants have observed that students returning to the university after gaining practical experience often express a keen interest and desire to delve into the theoretical aspects of the discipline:

> We have more practitioners who return, and they really like theory. You know because they know how to do practice. So, for me, to teach them how to practise and develop their

> skills, I mean, come on. [laughter] You know, they worked in practice. Having said that, with media relations, they struggle, even though they have worked in media relations daily. But when they have to do, you know, something more academically based and theorise, or outside of their comfort zone, you know, they think, they do this all the time, it is fine. But when they produce that work, they are quite surprised sometimes that they do not do as well as they thought they would.

Some interviewees also believed that despite the value of practical aspects, a strong foundation in historical and theoretical knowledge should be the priority. They argued that while practical aspects are important, the theories should extend beyond communication theories and include broader societal debates, such as sociological and philosophical theories. The expectation is for master's students to explore the entire history of communication and grasp the fundamental philosophical principles that underlie communication processes.

> On the master's side it has to be, I think, much more historically and theoretically anchored. So, great if they do some practical stuff. I think they should be doing practical things even on the master's level. But the theories they are linking to should be much more ... Like not communication theories, but sociological theories or philosophical theories, much deeper societal debates. So, you know, in the bachelor's programme, it is probably enough to introduce them to four or five theories of communication in society. At the master's level, they need to go through the whole history of that but also understand some of the philosophical principles of communication.

This understanding underpins the role of theory in master's programmes as one that stimulates critical thinking and significantly shapes students' mindsets and outlooks. It further shows that the value of theory is often acknowledged by students who have been working in practice for a couple of years.

The interviews, however, demonstrate that the straightforward dichotomy of a bachelor's degree equating to skills and a master's degree equating to theory and managerial attributes is not clear-cut; it consists of subtle nuances, which are further elaborated on below.

Skills versus theory

Some of our interviewees from departments with a legacy of critical theory made an interesting point about raising a tension between teaching theories and teaching skills that makes students "employable". They talked about "pressures" on focusing on these employability "skills":

> I think, across the board, across the three programmes, we kept a quite strong theoretical orientation. Our university is known to be a cradle of critical public relations, and we are very strongly committed to keeping that legacy. There have been a lot of pressures on employability and training, but we have held our fort, and we said no. You know, what we are offering is more theoretical. It is a theoretically oriented programme. It does not mean they do not get any skills, but skills are not our primary focus.

The discussion about skills is not only related to simple assumptions about teaching employability skills but also to skills in connecting theory to practice. The interview study shows that many participants expressed the importance of teaching students a comprehensive exploration of the skills that incorporate a theoretical framework into practical work tasks. By adopting this approach, students are informed about the underlying reasons behind specific procedures and the potential consequences of different choices. Students are encouraged to consider the theoretical implications of their decisions. One interviewee elaborated on the topic:

> Even when we do teach skills, we put quite a bit of emphasis on theorisation of those skills. So, you know, you produce a podcast; why did you produce it that way? Why did you use that kind of music? What does the theory say? (...) And equally, they produce a blog reflecting on semiotics and semiotics theory and why they positioned the elements the way they did. We have got quite a strong theoretical orientation. That is why we also have our programme as a Master of Science, not an MA.

This way of grounding theories in practice can be challenging to communicate and understand, even for academics at the same university. One respondent explained that they sometimes hear comments from colleagues at other departments, such as "Oh yeah, you just do practice". And I said, "no! This is not what we do". Further, they think that their unit and programme are misunderstood in this respect. This uncomprehending understanding from colleagues illustrates an implicit interpretation and definition of practice, which equates practice with real-life situations outside academia as being theoretically conducted and as instrumental handling of working tasks.

The subsequent comment from the same interviewee brought the discussion full circle, echoing the sentiment expressed in one of the initial quotes of this article regarding the necessity of a theoretical foundation when the education comes from a specific type of department and when they explain to students who want only practice that this might not be the ideal place for them:

> If I ever get an applicant who says, "Oh, I really want to learn how to work in practice and how to write press releases", or something along those lines, we usually advise that applicant that this is probably not the right programme and that they should consider taking an MA or look into doing training in practice. CIPR [The Chartered Institute of Public Relations] offers these kinds of courses that are very practical-oriented, while we have quite a strong commitment to theory.

In the following comment, another respondent questioned the standard expectation in strategic communication: graduates should be immediately ready for practical tasks. The respondent drew a parallel with surgeons who require additional training before operating. In their case, they expressed concern about the rapidly changing nature of the industry, where specific practical skills learned today might become outdated quickly:

> You know, we do not expect doctors, when they finish their university education, to be able to go into the operation theatre and operate on someone. You need to train them. So why do we have these expectations in PR practice that graduates will come into practice ready to start? And I know that some of the programmes do that. They train them for practice, but then things are changing so quickly, that if you learn today how to write the news release, by the time you start working in practice, things might really kind of change and move on. So, for us, it is really important to teach them not just how to but also why. Because "why is" does not change that quickly, but "how" tools can.

This interviewee's insight prompted reflection on the role of a strategic communicator and what employers expect of them as they enter the labour market. The essence of the message lies in recognising that understanding the fundamental principles provides a more enduring foundation for a professional role than learning solely practical skills connected to specific tools. In the context of university programmes, the goal is to equip students with a profound understanding that makes them capable of navigating and adapting to the dynamic changes in the surrounding world and their field over time.

Finally, a noteworthy reflection addressed the type of skills that are especially sought at the master's level. According to some interviewees, students often choose master's studies because they aspire to attain management or leadership roles, or even start their own consulting businesses:

> They don't need a master's to break into the business – they already are – but they aspire to management or leadership. [...] Maybe they want their bosses' job, maybe they're an agency executive, but they want to be a partner, or they want to break off and form their own consulting business.

This quote urges the need to consider what skills make students employable for upper management positions and to integrate these into curricula. Considering the various aspects mentioned by the interviewees in this section, skill emerges as a malleable construct. It is related to analytical skills as well as to employability skills. The notion was also discussed in relation to practice as having a somewhat lower status than theory, equating it with instrumentally conducted activities without a theoretical understanding of implications. This indicates that the reputational aspect is important to consider in the educational development process. The reputational aspect is implicitly addressed also when students are recommended to apply and study elsewhere if they do not appreciate theory.

Critical and corporate view

The interview study further extended the understanding of perceived differences between theory and practice by relating it to a critical and corporate view of teaching strategic communication.

The critical view emphasises strategic communication's societal, ethical and cultural implications by discussing connections to power dynamics. It seeks to uncover hidden biases and injustices in communication practices. It can be illustrated in the following quote where the respondent pointed out the importance of instilling a critical view in students:

> Strategic communication is incredibly powerful, and if they go out into the world and start using this tool without understanding that power and without taking responsibility for the effects they have, then I think I would have failed in my mission to educate them.

The quote highlights the importance of accountability and ethics in education, which another respondent further stressed: "You need to understand wider societal implications of what you are doing and how you look for creative solutions within". As interpreted in this study, the corporate view relates to adapting to business, where education prioritises career preparation in a professional context. Representatives of this view try to foster communication professionals who can move on and work in corporate environments and who can significantly contribute to the strategic direction of organisations. However, even the most critical scholars have a balanced approach and are fully aware that students will work for an organisation one day:

> The assumption is that even if you're critical, somehow you still are about how organisations communicate and making them do it better. In the business school arena, it aligns with things like critical management studies and critical marketing. Some interviewees highlight that it is crucial to approach the critical view cautiously as critical theory courses might garner interest from only a limited number of students and it is important to have a balanced approach also in this respect.

> I think we are far too focused on teaching skills as opposed to thinking about how we are going to elevate these people into actual thinkers who will contribute to organisational direction. [...] But I would be reluctant to ever teach just a critical theory course on its own. I think that only a very select group of students who are very interested in critical theory would actually want to do that.

Stability versus flexibility in the professionalisation process

Through this study, attempts were made to deal with different dynamic tensions concerning the professionalisation processes of strategic communication. The last theme concerns the subject's status in the world. Some professions try to remain more stable when developing their education programmes, while other actors choose to be more flexible by continuously addressing current issues. The following interviewee acknowledged the need for critical education about current social issues, even if only to stay relevant in education:

> I think one of the challenges is that you have to make sure that your curriculum continues to engage with the critical problems of the world. So, sustainability would be one example. Digital would be another, migration would be another, and global justice and social justice would be another. Those themes actually do not change a huge amount, but they kind of trend upwards and downwards. […] I think they are important for curricula to maintain their relevance too. So, if I did, you know, a critical perspective course this year and did not mention Black Lives Matter, did not mention #metoo, did not mention the environment, did not mention digital trends, I mean, it would just be nonsense.

To offer this kind of education, the participants balanced stability and flexibility by offering flexible current issues and a stable core curriculum. They followed their reasoning by presenting what they call "branching out [the education] into different areas":

> But I do not know that we necessarily have to present a whole master's programme in those areas. And I think it is partly because, once you did that, you would actually be branching out into different areas anyway. So yes, we did consider putting on a master's degree in environmental communication, but what would we do there? [...] You know, it would be similar to what we are already doing. And I think we can still do that by having a core curriculum.

This point of view highlights the importance of incorporating current societal issues as a transversal component in curricula. The challenges lie in ensuring the curriculum remains relevant by engaging with critical international problems such as sustainability, digital trends, migration and social justice. Some respondents agree that while these themes may fluctuate in significance, they should be consistently addressed within the core curriculum of programmes rather than necessitating the creation of entirely separate master's degrees. This approach involves integrating relevant courses from different disciplines to explore the multifaceted aspects of these issues and their impact on communication strategies.

DISCUSSION

The theory versus practice tension has persisted over the centuries and is prominent in the results of our study. Even if the interviewees used the theory vs practice dichotomy as a reference point, their understandings were more nuanced than expected. Overall, the division between theory and practice is constructed as opposing skills or capabilities, stemming from an archaic comprehension of different types of knowledge (cf. Aristotle, 1998), which through the centuries have proven to be problematic in various ways (cf. Dewey, 1999[1916]; Liedman, 2007). This was also evident in the results of this empirical study. It prompts the question of whether a simplified preconception should be dissolved to allow for a more nuanced understanding of how it affects the struggles of professionalisation in educational programmes at university.

The study illustrates how universities in different parts of the world balance the pressing demands and diverse expectations from stakeholders such as students and employers, contrasting them with internal pressures from colleagues, faculty and university management. In this respect, the study demonstrates that education for professions is a site of struggles, which has been acknowledged in earlier studies

(Tobias, 2003). This study contributes to a broader understanding of professionalisation processes as it illustrates how they manifest in a would-be profession that still seeks its future trajectory.

This discussion raises further issues about the expectations of the role of a strategic communicator based on the perception of the tension between theory and practice. The findings echo earlier findings about public relations, such as the division into the manager–technician role (Dozier & Broom, 1995) and the more recent division into managers, technicians and strategists (Steyn & Nieman, 2010). Even if strategic communication researchers have criticised these divisions, and today, communication roles are by many considered indiscernible (Falkheimer et al., 2016) or changing in extraordinary circumstances (Månsson & Eksell, 2024), the distinction was still vivid in the interviewees' minds. This distinction influences the management of stakeholder perspectives and the planning of university education programmes. It is, therefore, clear that strategic communication has conceptual baggage from public relations that burdens studies in the emerging field.

The study's findings also demonstrate that master programmes in strategic communication endorse specific theoretical frameworks, but the curriculum varies, at least to some extent, among universities. Therefore, these programmes cultivate various skills related to different job responsibilities, preparing students for a dynamic strategic communication role. This role, or rather, these roles encompass many understandings of tasks and responsibilities, which can be challenging to distinguish. In this sense, the findings align with Falkheimer et al. (2016) who argue that a clear division between these roles is not easily discernible in practice.

Interestingly, the different understandings of strategic communication as an educational subject, with its different theoretical departure points and promotion of various skills and distinctions, are subject to professionalisation processes that are understood differently at the various universities.

Educational programmes concentrating on teaching hands-on skills and real-world applications, such as planning, conducting and evaluating communication campaigns and strategies, managing different communication channels or working on software and tools, tend to focus on *how* the work is done. Professionalism, to be a professional strategic communicator, in this context, is connected to a specific behaviour or quality related to the performance of the work task (cf. Brante, 2011). In contrast, education programmes that emphasise theory and provide students with a thorough understanding of underlying principles, concepts and theories behind communication strategies are subject to a somewhat different understanding of professionalism. In this context, being a professional strategic communicator is more related to developing a specific general approach towards different stakeholders and society, including an ability to reflect on the role and task themselves.

As a result, the findings echo the ambitions of reflection-in-action presented by Schön (1983) in *The Reflective Practitioner*, as interviewees emphasised the role of theory and education as a process that develops individuals' capacity to apply theories in the performance of tasks and to continue reflective thinking in practice. However, it may be a token of the would-be professions' unstable ground to stress this aspect of education for professionalisation. To some extent, the universities that put theoretical studies in the centre recognise Schön's (1983) exhortation that professionalisation must lead to independent practitioners who can perform their work tasks but also reflect and evaluate these and their work roles. The findings show that the perceived tension between theory and practice and its relationship to professionalisation processes is collectively held, negotiated and agreed upon (cf. Foucault, 1971/1981). The tensions, including nuances and distinctions, result from implicit agreement to the same reference point (of distinguishing between theory and practice), while the variations within this discourse have been illustrated by the various quotes presented in this article. These variations simultaneously showcase what Houle (1981) defines as the dynamic approach to professionalisation where different actors within the field of strategic communication elaborate remotely but collectively to find a common identity and reach a high level of professionalisation. In the context of university programmes, the goal is to equip students with profound and enduring knowledge that makes them capable of navigating, adapting to and managing the dynamic changes in the surrounding world. Through the rapid evolution of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, new questions about the future role of knowledge will merge, probably impacting the understanding of theory and practice and the professionalisation process in previously unseen ways.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored and analysed perceptions of strategic communication held by programme directors, professors and departments from an educational perspective, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the dynamic tensions shaping the discipline's professionalisation.

The empirical findings show that the tension between theory and practice was the central tension perceived by the interviewees. The interviewees understood that education programmes emphasise theory by focusing on providing students with a thorough understanding of underlying principles, concepts and theories behind communication strategies. In contrast, programmes focusing more on practice prioritise employability, hands-on skills and real-world application. This involves teaching how to plan, conduct and evaluate communication campaigns and strategies, handle various communication channels and situations effectively, and use digital software and other tools. The former stresses the "why aspects" while the latter highlights the "how aspects".

The relationship between theory and practice is not as straightforward as initially indicated by the data. While many interviewees initially made easy estimations of the scope of theory and practice in their programmes, the findings reveal a greater complexity. The complexity is tied to varying distinctions between master's and bachelor's programmes and considerations of how progression is met within and between programmes at different levels. It also involves differing understandings of the practical application of theory and seemingly contradictory considerations of student skills during a programme and after graduation. Further, it relates to preconceived notions about student interests, experiences and values of education.

While the study was ambitious about finding a balanced approach between theory and practice, some interviewees emphasised external aspects outside academia, such as students' employability and consideration of societal and ethical factors in their future work. Others focused on internal academic elements, explaining how the balance between theories and practice might impact students' ability to retain knowledge. These perspectives collectively demonstrate a unified understanding of how theory and practice are closely intertwined rather than being seen as mutually exclusive.

The findings display a variety of understandings that simultaneously address subtle but essential aspects of the professionalisation process. Some of these aspects might be seen as universal parts of all professionalisation processes, while others are rooted in varying understandings of strategic communication as a subject.

The findings clearly show that strategic communication is a dynamic subject that lacks convergence towards a singular core but evolves through diversification. In addition, this study contributes to knowledge on the processes of professionalisation by shedding light on a profession not considered to be a profession in the strict sense but rather a would-be profession. Further, it illustrates the struggles with the legitimacy of a relatively new university subject – a would-be profession – that is relatively flexible in its choices regarding where the subject core lies.

Moreover, as perceptions are often manifested in decisions taken by programme directors, professors and departments of masters' programmes in strategic communication in different parts of the world, this study gives a flavoured understanding of how the perceived dynamic tensions of educational development impact the professionalisation process.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study explored perceptions of strategic communication from an educational perspective, as held by programme directors, professors and departments, to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic tensions that shape the professionalisation of the discipline. The findings revealed a variety of interpretations regarding both strategic communication as a subject and how professionalisation processes influence the development of education programmes. As a result, the practical implications are equally diverse.

One implication of this study is that educational institutions should sustain and develop a competitive advantage based on their current strengths. Educational programmes that emphasise theory by providing students with a thorough understanding of the underlying principles, concepts and theories behind communication strategies – often associated with critical approaches – should continue to develop curricula and teaching methods that reinforce these strengths.

Conversely, programmes that focus more on practical skills and that prioritise employability and real-world applications should also enhance their approach. However, we recognise that there is a clear limit to how applied a master's programme can be given restrictions in university legislation and other factors. In another section of this article, we highlighted the risks associated with an overemphasis on practical skills in an ever-changing landscape and we discussed the expectations of significant changes in strategic communication practices due to the introduction of computer-aided AI tools in the workplace. Several recent reports indicate changes in strategic communication roles as a result of the introduction of AI. This change necessitates further analysis and measures on how educational institutions should address these changes, integrate new components into the curriculum and prepare students for an increasingly computer-aided work life. This issue is particularly relevant for programmes focused on developing applied skills.

In terms of future development, creating a mixed environment that balances theory and practice may pose the greatest challenge. This approach aims to integrate the best aspects of both worlds: developing theoretical knowledge alongside practical skills. Recent developments highlight the practical skills that should be emphasised in the context of strategic communication. It is reasonable to anticipate even greater diversification within these types of programmes, some of which may still be difficult to predict. Establishing a specialisation or focus within this genre of programme could be essential, given both the current influence of related subfields in strategic communication and the emerging technological advancements that will impact the future careers of strategic communicators.

In terms of professionalisation, it is important to recognise that strategic communication is a relatively new field and that it is still defining its future direction. As such, it is likely to be more affected by changes in the external environment. This means that different interpretations of what professionalisation entails may arise, especially during periods of change and crisis, which could lead to unforeseen consequences for this field of education. Given that we are at the beginning of what is being called the fourth industrial revolution, it may be worthwhile to revisit this topic in the near future.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was not to compare educational systems or traditions on different continents. However, it is essential to recognise the significance of the contextual factors of the respective educational programmes included in this research, such as educational systems, traditions and societal values. These factors have likely implications for perceptions of professionalisation, expectations of occupational roles and performance of work tasks. It is a limitation of this study that these aspects were not explored in any greater depth.

Future research could investigate how emerging academic disciplines, such as strategic communication, establish legitimacy for their educational programmes through struggles related to institutional practices such as positioning, professionalisation and discourse. Analysing how universities and industry stakeholders frame the essence and value of these relatively new fields over time may offer insights into broader patterns of professionalisation and the formation of academic identity.

The study also raised new questions about the impact of a significant financial investment in education. Does it result in a greater emphasis on acquiring practical skills that improve graduates' resumes for the job market? Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate whether employers in different regions have different preferences when evaluating candidates based on these varying educational priorities and profiles.

REFERENCES

Abbott, A. (1988). *The systems of professions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Alvesson, M. & Sköldberg, K. (2018). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: Sage publications.

Alvesson, M. (2022). The triumph of emptiness. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press.

Andersson, R., Heide, M. & Simonsson, C. (2023). *Kommunikatörers professionalisering – en balansakt mellan olika roller*. Lund: Lund University. Available from: https://lucris.lub.lu.se/ws/portalfiles/portal/160751729/Kommunikat_rers_professionalisering.pdf

Aristotle. (1998). The Metaphysics. UK: Penguin Classics.

Brante, T. (2011). Professions as science-based occupations. *Professions and Professionalism*, 1(1):4–20. http://journals.hioa.no/index.php/pp/article/view/147

Bridgen, E. (2017). Experiencing public relations. London: Routledge.

Brinkmann, S. & Kvale, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: Sage publications.

Broom, G.M. & Dozier, D.M. (1986). Advancement for public relations role models. *Public Relations Review*, 12 (Spring):37–56. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(86)80039-X

Broom, G.M. & Smith, G.D. (1979). Testing the practitioner's impact on clients. *Public Relations Review*, 5(3):47–59. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(79)80027-2

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. Sage publications.

Cheney, G. & Ashcraft, K.L (2007). Considering "the professional" in communication studies: Implications for theory and research within and beyond the boundaries of organizational communication. *Communication Theory*, 17(2):146–175, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2007.00290.x

Collins, R. (1990). Changing conceptions in the sociology of professions: Formation of professions. In: R. Torstendahl and M. Burrage (eds). *The formation of professions*. London: Sage.

Collins, R. (2002). Credential inflation and the future of universities. In S. Brint (ed.). *The future of the city of intellect*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Cutlip, S.M., Center, A. H. & Broom, G. M. (2000). *Effective public relations*. 8th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (eds). (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. 5th ed. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Dewey, J. (1999)[1916]. *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: Free Press.

Dozier, D.M. & Broom, G.M. (1995). Evolution of the manager role in public relations practice. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 7 (spring):3–26. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjprr0701_02

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2018). *Strategic communication: An introduction*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Falkheimer, J., Heide, M., Simonsson, C., Zerfass, A. & Verhoeven, P. (2016). Doing the right things or doing things right? Paradoxes and Swedish communication professionals' roles and challenges. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 21(2):142–159. https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-06-2015-0037

Foucault, M. (1971/1981). *The order of discourse*. London: Routledge.

Frandsen, F. & Johansen, W. (2015). The role of communication executives in strategy and strategizing. In D.R. Holtzhausen & A. Zerfass (eds). *The Routledge handbook of strategic communication*. Routledge, 229–243.

Freidson, E. (2001). *Professionalism: The third logic*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gregory, A. (2011). The state of the public relations profession in the UK: A review of the first decade of the twenty-first century. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 16(2): 89–104. https://doi.org/10.1108/13563281111141633

Grunig, J. E. (1992). Communication, public relations and effective organizations: An overview of the book. In J. E. Grunig (ed.). *Excellence in public relations and communication management*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1–30.

Grunig, J. E. & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. New York: Holt.

Grunig, L.A., Grunig, J.E. & Dozier, D.M. (2002). *Excellent public relations and effective organizations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Verčič, D. & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(1):3–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/15531180701285244

Houle, C.O. (1981). *Continuing learning in the professions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Hudson, K. (1978). The jargon of the professions. London: Macmillan.

Johnson, T.R. (1972). *Professions and power*. London: Macmillan.

Kultgren, J. (1988). *Ethics and professionalism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

L'Etang, J. (2008). Public relations: Concepts, practice, and critique. Los Angeles: Sage publications.

Larson, M.S. (1990). In the matter of experts and professionals, or how impossible it is to leave nothing unsaid. In R. Torstendal & M. Burrage (eds). *The formation of the professions: Knowledge, state and strategy*. London: Sage Publications, 24–50.

Liedman, S-E. (2007). Ett oändligt äventyr. Viborg: Albert Bonniers Förlag.

Månsson, M. & Eksell, J. (2024). Communication work for influencing destination resilience – DMOs experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2024.2308857

Millerson, G.L. (1964). *The qualifying association*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Moss, D., Newman, A. & DeSanto, B. (2005). What do communication managers do? Defining and refining the core elements of management in a public relations/corporate communication context. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(4):873–890. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900508200408

Noordegraaf, M. (2007). From "pure" to "hybrid" professionalism: Present-day professionalism in ambiguous public domains. *Administration* & Society, 39(6):761–785. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399707304434

Nothhaft, H. & Zerfass, A. (2023). Public relations in a postdisciplinary world: On the possibility of establishing a constitutive theory within the tribal struggles of communication disciplines. In C.H. Botan & E.J. Sommerfeldt (eds). *Public Relations III: In the Age of Publics*. Routledge.

Nothhaft, H., Werder, K.P., Vercic, D. & Zerfass, A. (2018). Strategic communication: Reflections on an elusive concept. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4):352–366. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1492412

Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E. & Moules, N.J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Overton-de Klerk, N. (2023). Reflections on the current state

and future of strategic communication as paradigm and practice. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 42(1):4–21. https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v42i1.2486
Patton, M. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. 4th ed. Sage publications.
Prasad, P. (2018). *Crafting qualitative research: Beyond positivist traditions*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
Rennstam, J & Wästerfors, D (2018) *Analyze* – Crafting your data in qualitative research. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
Rosén, M.E. (2014). From ad-man to digital manager: Professionalization through Swedish job advertisements 1960–2010. *Journal of Communication Management*, 18(1):16–39. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-04-2013-0038
Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage publications.
Schön, D.A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.
Schreier M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. Sage publications.
Simonsson, C. & Heide, M. (2021). Developing a communicative logic –The key to communication professionalism. In *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 15(3):253–273. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2021.1906682
Steyn, B. & Niemann, L. (2010). Enterprise strategy: A concept that explicates corporate communication's strategic contribution at the macro-organisational level. J*ournal of Communication Management*, 14(2): 06–126. https://doi.org/10.1108/13632541011034574
Steyn, B. (2000). *Strategic management roles of the corporate communication function*. Dissertation. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
Swedish Research Council (2017). *God forskningssed*.
Tindall, N.T.J. & Holtzhausen, D.R. (2011). Toward a roles theory for strategic communication: The case of South Africa. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 5(2):74–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2011.561075
Tobias, R. (2003). Continuing professional education and professionalization: Travelling without a map or compass? *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 22(5):445–456. https://doi.org/10.1080/0260137032000102823
Torstendahl, R. (1990). Essential properties, strategic aims and historical development: Three approaches to theories of professionalism. In M. Burrage and R. Torstendahl (eds). *Professions in Theory and History: Rethinking the Study of the Professions*. London: Sage, 44–61.
Werder, K.P., Nothhaft, H., Verčič, D. & Zerfass, A. (2018). Strategic communication as an emerging interdisciplinary paradigm. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4):333–351. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1494181
Zerfass, A. & Volk, S.C. (2018). How communication departments contribute to corporate success: The communications contributions framework. *Journal of Communication Management*, 22(4):397–415. https://doi-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.1108/JCOM-12-2017-0146
Zerfass, A., Vercic, D., Nothhaft, H. & Werder, K.P. (2018). Strategic communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4):487–505. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485

Stakeholder Relationships in the Child Protection Organisation (CPO) Sector: A Strategic Integrated Communication Approach

AUTHOR(S)

Anette Degenaar

North-West University, South Africa

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2767-5986

Lynnette Fourie

North-West University, South Africa

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7128-4958

Lida Holtzhausen

North-West University, South Africa

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1275-6684

PUBLISHED ONLINE
Volume 44 (1) May 2025
Pages 74-91
Submitted December 2023
Accepted March 2025

DOI
10.36615/xkebrf47

ISSN
Online 2957-7950
Print 0259-0069

Abstract

This article explores the applicability of a strategic integrated approach to communication to manage stakeholder relationships in the child protection organisation context. The Niemann (2005) implementation model for strategic integrated communication in the for-profit sector was taken as the point of departure. Taking the specific challenges and constraints of the child protection organisation sector into account, the Niemann model is adapted to a framework for strategic integrated communication in the child protection organisation sector. The study included focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with communication practitioners, managers and social workers from four registered national child protection organisations, along with external media and law experts.

The results indicate that while the basic guidelines of the strategic integrated communication model apply to child protection organisations, not all aspects are attainable in the context of the child protection organisation. The strategic integrated communication framework for the child protection organisation context argues for integrated collaboration across contextual, organisational, stakeholder and environmental integration areas. The strategic integrated communication framework emphasises the interrelatedness needed to achieve communication outcomes, build strong relationships, maintain a recognisable brand and responsibly report on child protection issues. The study identifies five enablers – learning mindset, expertise sharing, networking, advocacy and technology adoption – to achieve the strategic goal of safeguarding vulnerable children.

It is recommended to move from a stakeholder integration area to a stakeholder responsive area, which emphasises building trusting relationships and a recognisable brand.

Keywords

Child protection organisations (CPOs), confidentiality, nonprofit organisations (NPOs), South Africa, stakeholder relationships, stakeholder responsiveness, strategic communication, strategic integrated communication, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, nonprofit organisations (NPOs) often fill the gap left by government and the private sector in the provision of social services in society (Chauke & Du Plessis, 2013; Nwauche & Flanigan, 2022; Patel, 2012). A child protection organisation (CPO) is a specific type of NPO that forms part of the social services in South Africa, which addresses the needs of abused, neglected and vulnerable children.

Although these organisations are partially subsidised by the Department of Social Development, the subsidies are far from sufficient and CPOs are forced to resort to other means to raise funds to be sustainable (Damons, 2023). Stagnant subsidies have pushed designated child protection organisations into a critical state (ACVV, 2023). To address shrinking budgets, CPOs engage in various short-term marketing and fundraising activities, such as organising charity events, leveraging online crowdfunding, running social media campaigns, sending email appeals, applying for grants from the National Lottery Fund, foundations and corporations; and creating merchandise to sell, thereby raising both funds and awareness for their cause.

Raising extra funds can be challenging, given that South Africa has a large NPO sector with 289,753 registered NPOs and 3,803 applications in progress (Department of Social Development, 2024). NPOs therefore have to compete with one another for donations and support from government, churches, for-profit organisations, funding agencies and for funding projects to be sustainable (Gastrow, 2019; Maboya & McKay, 2019).

In this competitive environment, communication plays an important role in relationship building, mainly with the aim of raising funds. However, relationship building in the CPO sector is a complex process.

CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES REGARDING STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CPO CONTEXT

As is the case in the broader NPO sector, the absence of communication expertise in raising brand awareness and reporting issues impedes CPOs building of stakeholder relationships with stakeholders (see Benecke & Holtzhausen, 2018:232; Holtzhausen, 2013). Persons responsible for the communication function are often not fully prepared for their communication responsibilities, since they are not always trained communication practitioners and might also have other responsibilities. Furthermore, limited resources are available for the communication function, which is often regarded as a "luxury item" and mainly for "self-promotion" (Degenaar, 2021:26; Holtzhausen, 2013:6; Richardson, 2017).

Besides these general challenges and constraints relating to the broader NPO environment, CPOs also faces challenges specific to the NPO sector. These are briefly outlined below.

Diverse stakeholders

It is argued in this article that CPOs have diverse stakeholders, which poses challenges that are unique to the CPO sector. The most important stakeholders are the children themselves, whose safety and rights are the primary concern. CPOs must also involve parents and caregivers, who play a central role in a child's upbringing and often receive support, guidance and counselling to enhance their parenting skills or to address specific challenges.

Government agencies and policymakers are another essential set of stakeholders, as they often shape the legal and regulatory framework within which CPOs operate and provide funding. In addition, the broader community, including schools, community organisations and law enforcement agencies, play a vital role. Finally, donors and supporters, ranging from everyday individuals such as "the man in the street" to philanthropic foundations, provide financial and moral support, allowing CPOs to fulfil their mission and expand their reach. It is evident that the communication requirements for the different stakeholders varying from the children to the donors and funders would vastly differ and could even conflict with one another.

CPO communication legal restrictions

CPOs must adhere to binding statutory and regulatory restrictions, particularly pertaining to confidentiality, when communicating about the organisation and the children under their care. Current legislation such as the Children's Act 38 of 2005 makes separate provisions that prevent children under statutory order from being identified. Children under statutory order include persons under the age of 18 years who were or are part of Children's Court proceedings (Children's Act 38 of 2005).

Ethical concerns

Apart from formal legislation, registered social workers must also strictly adhere to their profession's own code of ethics, which emphasises their primary obligation to render a quality service in a professional and ethically correct manner to protect the child's well-being (Meleyal, 2017; South African Council for Social Services Professions, 2020).

These constraints and challenges impact on the relationship between CPOs and their stakeholders, and often lead to negative perceptions shaped by the media. The tone of media reports about child protection is generally negative and sometimes sensational, such as the death of a child in alternative care or while on the caseload of a CPO, or social workers removing children from a home (Franklin & Parton, 1991; Sjöström & Öhman, 2018; The Media Monitoring Project, 2004; Welliver, 2020).

Due to the restriction of confidentiality, social workers cannot publicly justify actions taken to protect abused and neglected children. Therefore, they often have to accept inaccurate stereotypes (Forrest, 2013; Nhedz & Makofane, 2015). Degenaar and Fourie (2024) argue that digital media has amplified this negative impact and increased the risk of confidentiality breaches and the spread of false information, as the ordinary person on the street can now publish aspects to which a CPO cannot respond due to ethical and legal implications.

The new media landscape with interactive media has brought about new opportunities and means of interacting with stakeholders (Degenaar & Fourie, 2024; Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013; Van Baalen & Mulder, 2016), but also some challenges. On the positive side, it creates opportunities for personalised storytelling, which can enhance stakeholder relationships, foster transparency and potentially attract more support. While Internet technology and social networking sites have made it easier to share images and information about children, it is paramount for CPOs to ensure that personalisation is done within legal boundaries and that it does not compromise the privacy rights of children under statutory order (see Degenaar & Fourie,2024 for a more comprehensive discussion).

Furthermore, the real-time interactive nature of social networking sites makes them difficult to manage and impossible to control (Freberg, 2018). For CPOs, this means that while anyone can comment freely by expressing distorted perceptions, and by obtaining and distributing images, videos and information, thereby identifying children under statutory order on the Internet, CPOs are bound by confidentiality restrictions and cannot respond. This can lead to mistrust between CPOs and their stakeholders who could be misinformed, thus leading to damaging the public image of a CPO.

Against the above-mentioned background, it is argued that to secure long-term sustainability, CPOs should adopt a more strategic, long-term communication approach, integrating all communication functions, rather than solely concentrating on short-term fundraising. As there is often not a dedicated, expert person to perform these functions, it would also require a team effort (i.e., unity of effort) by CPO functionaries, including social workers, to participate in more integrated communication processes towards building strong stakeholder relationships.

The research question under investigation in this article is thus: How can a strategic integrated communication approach to stakeholder relationships be adapted to be suitable for the CPO sector?

The question is answered by taking the strategic integrated implementation model of Niemann as a point of departure. This is a South African implementation model that has not been further explored in research. While this model was developed for the for-profit sector, the strategic unified approach to stakeholder integration could be valuable to the CPO sector. However, it was first anticipated that this model would need to be adapted to take into account the unique challenges of the CPO sector. Second, the perceptions of participants from the CPO sector (managers, communication practitioners, social workers) as well as external media and law experts regarding communication and relationship management challenges were determined. Finally, the findings culminated in a proposed strategic integrated communication (SIC) framework for the CPO context, with the focus on stakeholder relations.

THEORETICAL POINT OF DEPARTURE: NIEMANN'S STRATEGIC INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION IMPLEMENTATION MODEL

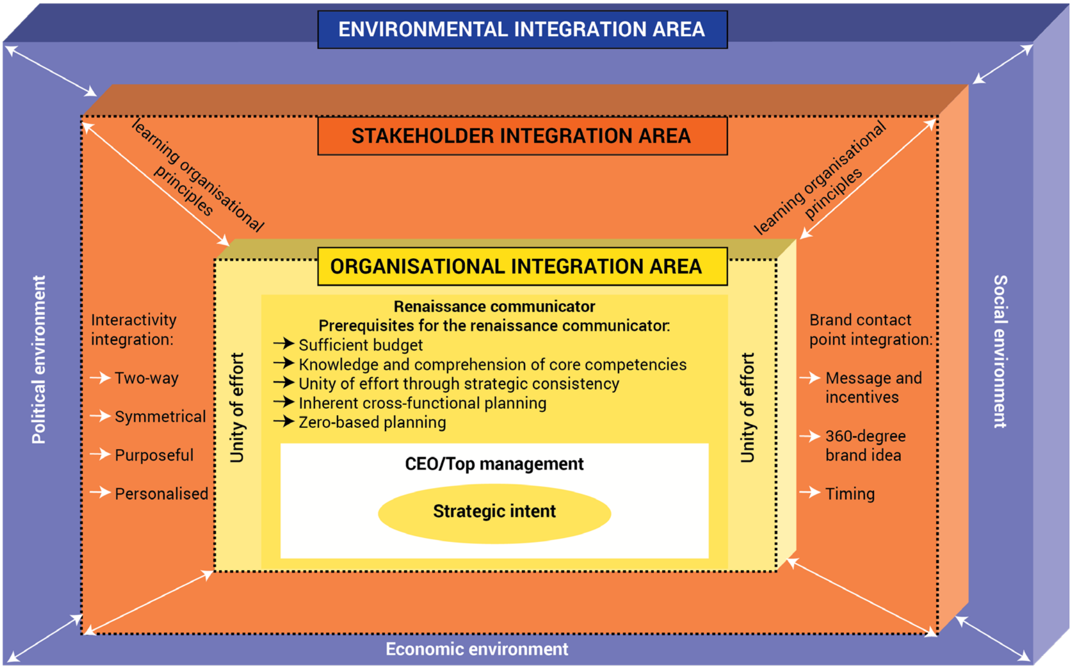

Figure 1: A SIC conceptual model of implementation (Niemann, 2005:215; Niemann-Struweg, 2015:244)

The model is grounded by two underlying principles: strategic intent should drive all communication and an organisation should be a learning organisation. These principles manifest in three areas of integration (organisational, stakeholder, environmental) that are interrelated with a free flow of information (Niemann, 2005; Niemann-Struweg, 2015).

This article focusses specifically on the stakeholder integration area of the SIC model, aiming to explore and adapt Niemann's (2005) model to suit CPOs' operating context. See Degenaar (2021) and Degenaar et al. (2022) for a discussion of the other areas.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF THE NIEMANN MODEL FOR SIC: STAKEHOLDER INTEGRATION

Niemann (2005) identifies two tiers of stakeholder integration (see Figure 1). The first tier is the interactivity integration area that involves two-way symmetrical, purposeful and personalised communication, and the second is brand contact point integration, which relates to stakeholder-appropriate messages and the 360-degree brand idea.

Stakeholder interactivity integration

Stakeholder interactivity involves active stakeholder participation and collaboration between an organisation and its stakeholders (Duncan, 2002; Niemann, 2005). It goes beyond traditional reciprocal communication as it is "interactive in nature", and emphasises the continuous creation, exchange and sharing of meanings by all parties involved (Van Ruler, 2018:379). This interactivity is facilitated by means of two-way symmetrical communication and purposeful, personalised communication.

Two-way symmetrical communication is characterised by stakeholder engagement, active listening and mutual understanding (Grunig, 2013). This implies that the organisation should respond to stakeholders to understand their views, and at the same time balance the needs of the stakeholder with "serving the public" (see Heide et al., 2018:462). Two-way symmetrical communication requires not only listening, but also providing constructive feedback, which is imperative for fostering cooperation and mutual benefit (Bosley, 2014; Broom & Sha, 2013; Morsing & Schultz, 2006) and ultimately establishing trust. For a CPO, this would mean that stakeholders understand the benefits of involvement in or donations to the NPO, while the CPOs themselves should communicate their assistance requirements from stakeholders, particularly considering resource competition. Establishing trust with potential donors goes beyond fundraising and aims to cultivate relationships and increase donor participation (Klein, 2007; Norton, 2003).

Purposeful communication entails intentional information exchange with a defined goal. Messages that are crafted are aligned with specific and mutually beneficial intentions (Niemann-Struweg, 2015).

Personalised interaction recognises individuals' interests, behaviours and needs in communication (Denner et al., 2019; Karvonen, 2010). This enables trust building and establishing meaningful connections between stakeholders and the organisation (Türkel et al., 2021).

CPOs should be able to personalise interaction and tailor content by including email newsletters that address individuals by their first names and that share impactful stories and images of assisted children to foster relevance and personal connection with individuals interested in child protection issues. Personalised content also typically entails the use of emotional appeals to resonate with the audience (Clayton, 2017; Engelbrecht & Ngongo, 2018; Network for Good, 2017). While the content shared by CPOs lends itself to emotional appeals regarding the plight of children, the legal and ethical considerations restrict the applicability of emotional appeals.

Brand contact point integration

Brand contact points encompass the various ways in which stakeholders encounter a brand's message, including in-person interactions, websites, social media and other communication channels (Niemann-Struweg, 2015; Rensburg & Cant, 2009). Stakeholder behaviour, along with marketing and public relations activities, shapes the brand of an organisation. Interactions across diverse contact points significantly impact stakeholder perception, leading to either positive or negative views (Enslin, 2005; Wang, 2007). This implies that adopting a communication strategy that integrates all activities and takes a strategic approach proves more effective than isolated efforts (Wang, 2007).

Brand contact point integration is further based on the following two ideas: appropriately timed messages and delivery systems, and the 360-degree brand idea (Niemann-Struweg, 2015).

Effective communication requires the customisation and timing of messages to meet stakeholder preferences and needs through their preferred communication channels (Niemann-Struweg, 2015). While personalisation focuses on tailoring interactions from the organisation's side, customisation involves stakeholders' reactions to content that aligns with their individual preferences (Davis, 2018). Understanding diverse stakeholders and their goals is therefore key in developing effective messages (Niemann-Struweg, 2015; Van Baalen & Mulder, 2016).

Ultimately, customising and timing messages, catering to stakeholder preferences and utilising appropriate channels can help CPOs to stand out and foster strong, long-term relationships with diverse stakeholders (see Niemann-Struweg, 2015).

The 360-degree brand idea emphasises that all employees of an organisation are representatives of the brand and contribute to brand contact points with the public and stakeholders (Heide et al., 2018). The person responsible for the communication function plays a vital role in understanding stakeholder preferences, integrating messages effectively and fostering continued discussions within the organisation (Heide et al., 2018). To implement the 360-degree brand idea, the organisation must adopt an integrated approach across various contact points, including personal interactions, events and multiple communication channels (Niemann-Struweg, 2015). But in the context of the CPO, social workers face restrictions in disclosing information about children under statutory orders.

From the above-mentioned discussion it is clear that while the Niemann model provides guidance for the integration of stakeholder relations in the organisation, it would need some adaptation to be suitable to the CPO environment.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research approach

A qualitative research design was followed using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions as data collection methods. This was done to comprehend the different perspectives of a wide variety of participants (representing sampled CPOs and stakeholders) regarding the communication function of the child protection sector in South Africa. The study was approved by the Arts Ethics Committee of the North-West University (NWU) (ethics number: NWU-00370-17-A7).

Sampling of organisations

The child welfare sector is the largest sector within the social services-driven NPO category in South Africa, which is beyond the scope of this study. Hence, four of the largest registered national child welfare organisations in South Africa and various regional organisations, and local branches that form part of these four national organisations, were purposively selected. The selection criteria required the organisations to be prominent, registered NPOs in the social services sector and designated CPOs in South Africa. Furthermore, the national organisations had to include various provincial and regional organisations and local branches as part of their structure. The national organisations selected were RATA Social Services, SAVF Social Services, Child Welfare South Africa and the Council of Church Social Services (CSCC). From these, four provincial, 10 regional and 11 local branches were purposively selected. Five of the regional organisations were chosen specifically because they have official communication officers.

To gather both in-depth individual insights and diverse group perspectives, two methods were used: semi-structured interviews and focus groups, as indicated in Tables 1 and 2.

Selection of participants for semi-structured interviews

Managers and communication practitioners from participating organisations and external legal and media experts were purposively sampled, as depicted in Table 1. There were 22 semi-structured interviews in total.

Table 1: Sampling of participants for semi-structured interviews

Target population	Sample size of participants (*n*=22)	Criteria purposive sampling of participants	Data collection method
CPO Managers	10 National (4) Regional (6)	This person should be situated at the Head Office and fulfil the role of the highest ranking official at national and regional level.	Semi-structured interviews
CPO Communication practitioners	8 National (3) Regional (5)	The job description had to include the responsibility for the communication function, or assisting with the communication function.	
External experts	4 (2 media and 2 legal experts)	Extensive knowledge of Children's Court proceedings and child protection matters in their respective fields of law and media.	

Selection of participants for focus groups

The first focus group consisted of seven social workers in provincial managerial positions. The other three focus groups consisted of social workers working in the field and employed at 11 regional CPOs that formed part of the four selected organisations. All focus groups were facilitated by the first author.

Table 2 summarises the sampling of participants for focus groups.

Table 2: Sampling of participants for focus groups

Target population	Sample size of participants (n=27)	Criteria purposive sampling of participants	Data collection method
CPO Provincial managers: Social services	7	Extensive knowledge and expertise, with each more than 20 years' experience in the field of child protection.	Focus group: 1
CPO Social workers in the field	20 Focus group 2 = 8 Focus group 3 = 7 Focus group 4 = 5	Work at branches that were in some way affiliated with one of the four national participating organisations. Social workers could share and discuss their different perceptions, experiences, needs and concerns regarding the topic of SIC with one another in groups in their own vocabulary to gain a better understanding of their 'lived world'.	Focus groups: 2–4

Data analysis

The recordings of the interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed by an external person and analysed by the researcher by means of qualitative content analysis (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). The researcher chose to analyse the data manually. She created a Word document with concepts and constructs, which acted as a guide for conducting the analysis of the huge amount of text. The manual analysis was done by carefully reading through the transcripts several times and typing the corresponding information on the appropriate page of the spreadsheet. The corresponding information was then re-analysed to identify aspects to answer the specific research questions. From the Word document, the data were captured on Excel spreadsheets, divided into pages for communication persons, managers, external experts and social workers. The same procedure was followed with the identification of new themes. The main themes for this article were the concepts and sub-concepts related to stakeholder integration (see Table 3).

Table 3: Categories of stakeholder integration

Theme	Concepts	Sub-concepts
Stakeholder integration	Interactivity integration	Two-way symmetrical communication. Purposeful, personalised communication.
	Brand contact point integration	Customisation of messages and delivery systems. 360 brand idea.

FINDINGS

In order to answer the research question, how can a strategic integrated communication approach to stakeholder relationships be adapted to be suitable to the CPO sector, the findings are discussed according to the main concepts regarding the stakeholder integration area of the Niemann SIC model.

Interactivity integration

Two-way symmetrical communication: Stakeholder identification

The Department of Social Development was identified as the most important stakeholder due to its funding role. In addition, various stakeholders were identified, including management bodies, government departments, NPOs, volunteers, media, external consultants, companies, small businesses, churches and the broader community.

It became apparent that stakeholders are prioritised differently based on the positions, functions and fields of expertise of participants. Managers at the national level prioritised networking with national bodies, government departments and other NPOs in the field of child and family care, highlighting the collaborative nature of their work, "as we are in this together". Conversely, communication personnel emphasised engaging with the broader community, donors and the media, recognising the importance of outreach and fundraising efforts. Social workers prioritised communication with local government officials, non-profits and volunteers, emphasising the importance of serving parents, families and children.

This confirms the assumption that stakeholder experiences and expectations of participants differ, and that communication needs to be conveyed to diverse stakeholder groups.

Listen to understand views: The majority of participants, including legal experts, found it challenging to listen to stakeholders' views due to differing perspectives and unrealistic expectations. The primary focus of listening was to understand the motivations behind stakeholders' donations and their desire to be associated with the CPO.

Communication participants acknowledged that they could not single-handedly listen to and meet stakeholder expectations, feeling that "we are not magicians". Furthermore, it was evident that they could not meet all stakeholder expectations due to limited resources, funding, skills, technology and confidentiality policies that hinder accommodating all stakeholder needs. Consequently, participants were hesitant to engage in open two-way discussions, leading to a lack of clarity regarding stakeholders' viewpoints. One manager aptly summarised the situation, expressing uncertainty about the desires of external stakeholders and how to gain their support: "We are not sure what people out there want and how to get their buy-in".

This indicates a misunderstanding of the listening process, as participants primarily focused on what stakeholders expected from them, resulting in limited reciprocal discussions. The findings highlight the need for diverse communication activities and an integrated approach to comprehend stakeholders. This supports the idea that open two-way discussions should foster mutual understanding of stakeholders' needs.

Feedback: The findings highlighted four trends regarding feedback. First, the majority of all participants associated feedback primarily with providing financial feedback to stakeholders and being transparent and accountable when receiving funding. They recognised the necessity to share audited financial statements and annual reports to demonstrate accountability and governance by means of their website or physical reports.

Second, participants identified the mutual interests between stakeholders and the organisation, highlighting the need for feedback that showcases how children were helped. Donors, particularly large corporations, sought so-called success stories and requested photos of children impacted by their donations, despite legal constraints and confidentiality concerns. Communication personnel and managers acknowledged the importance of finding alternative ways to provide feedback, while staying authentic and compliant with regulations. However, social workers and external legal experts prioritised child protection over such feedback. Frustration among social workers, managers and communication practitioners arose, as donors preferred feedback on programme outcomes rather than overhead costs. This led to a desire to raise public awareness about the necessity of resources for effective work. One participant responsible for the communication function voiced her frustration in this regard: "If only we can make the public more aware of the fact that manpower, vehicles with petrol and telephone calls are necessary to eventually be able to do the work."

Third, participants held conflicting views on providing feedback on social networking sites and online platforms. Managers and communication personnel relied on social workers for the necessary information to share feedback with stakeholders on these platforms. However, social workers expressed reservations about sharing case-specific feedback about their clients, even though they recognised the importance of informing donors about how their money was being spent. Social workers highlighted the complexity and confidentiality of child protection processes, making it challenging to provide a traditional "success story" for public display.

Fourth, the increase in negative online comments, complaints and inquiries emerged as a significant concern for all participants. These comments primarily surfaced on platforms such as Facebook, monitored either by managers, administrative personnel or the communication function representative. However, monitoring these platforms 24/7 was challenging, leading to delayed responses and the rapid spread of unsubstantiated rumours. Feedback was further complicated by the need to obtain information from social workers before responding and to ensure respect for client confidentiality. Consequently, these circumstances contributed to a negative perception of child protection, as people often failed to understand the necessary procedures and perceived the CPO as unresponsive. As recommended by an external media expert, when a CPO receives an enquiry from a journalist, whether for an online platform or in print, "rather comment to the best of your ability, because if you say no comment, they will think that you want to sweep something under the carpet".

Finally, during focus group discussions with social workers, it was evident that they were uncertain as to who should react to online queries and negative comments and where the responsibility lay. The majority of the social workers conveyed that they did not want to be involved in Facebook disputes on community pages. The only feedback that they were prepared to give was that complainants should arrange a formal appointment. They were very hesitant to use any social media platform for any communication with the public or with clients, as some of them had been stalked or harassed by clients and had even had to block them.

Overall, unrealistic expectations and a lack of response from social workers, combined with a lack of knowledge and skills, posed challenges to the feedback function and donor relationships.

Mutually beneficial relationships: The participants recognised the importance of maintaining and cultivating donor relationships for mutual benefit, primarily driven by the need for funding. Communication efforts largely focused on providing information to donors, with the emphasis on financial benefits and tax exemptions. However, the majority of the communication persons in the semi-structured interviews and managers during the focus group discussions expressed frustration that this was not sufficient to manage stakeholder relations: "People are sick and tired of being bombarded with requests". Stakeholders were reluctant to contribute to overhead costs such as telephone bills, electricity and fuel for transport, despite their necessity for the CPO's operations.

A common concern among participants was the lack of public awareness regarding how to support CPOs and the potential benefits involved. This drove a strong emphasis on one-way information distribution to raise awareness and differentiate the CPO from other non-profits as the saying "known is loved" implies – the more you know about an organisation, the more likely you are to develop positive feelings about it and eventually support their cause.

Confidentiality and child welfare considerations limited communication options. While communication practitioners were open to exploring alternative approaches, resistance from social workers hindered their efforts. The findings did not support the idea of organisation-wide support for the CPO's work, as employees lacked agreement on achieving mutual benefit. Communication practitioners felt burdened with responsibility, as managers and social workers were occupied with other tasks "so I have to ask this, and ask that, and ask again because they work with the children on a daily basis". External media experts observed a general fear among CPOs in engaging with the media, leading to missed opportunities for free publicity and support. An external media expert put this well: "Often the social work supervisors are sceptical, they do not trust the journalist. Maybe sometimes that is a mistake and if you know someone and you can trust that person in the journalistic world it (a story) can be done very well. Be open and give that person a chance and build a trusting relationship".

External media experts emphasised the need for widespread stakeholder support to fulfil the CPO's mission, while upholding legislation and prioritising the best interest of the child. However, the different interpretations of the dignity and best interest of the child cause unease and hesitance to use emotional messages. On the one hand, the CPO wants to "sell a story" and, on the other hand, the social worker has the responsibility to protect their client, while adhering to their own ethical code of conduct, which can impede cooperation and sharing information with the communication practitioner.

Outcome of two-way communication is trust: The majority of the participants placed extremely high value on trust in the context of the CPO's work. Trust was perceived as being closely linked to core values, particularly integrity and accountability. Participants, especially managers, believed that trust is built over time and they acknowledged the trust placed in the CPO by existing stakeholders, "those that know us", such as the government and churches. However, there were differences in perspectives between managers and social workers regarding the nature of trust. Social workers viewed trust from the standpoint of their clients, valuing their return and trust in seeking assistance. While financial accountability and service quality were seen as contributing to trust, other aspects such as openly sharing information were not explicitly associated with trust in the discussions.

Purposeful, personalised communication

Concerns over lack of control and exposing children on interactive media: Interactive media can be used to involve stakeholders in becoming emotionally invested in the CPO's mission of protecting vulnerable children, but the majority of the participants feared the lack of control that goes hand-in-hand with interactive media, emphasising the need for "time and expertise." Communication practitioners and external media experts felt that "there are ways of working around confidentiality" and were prepared to explore alternative ways of communicating while taking legal and ethical stipulations into consideration. However, the majority of social workers and legal experts were very hesitant to use emotional appeals to portray the vulnerable children that benefit from their services. As stated by one of the national managers, "you often want to send across a positive message, but then you cannot quite see how it will come out at the other end … your intention is good … but anyone can make mistakes with material". It is important to note that as the majority of the middle management comprises social workers, their perceptions add to the hesitancy. Requests by the person responsible for the communication function are seen as an intrusion and as unrealistic. During focus group 2 with social workers in the field, they made comments such as "they just want tear-jerker stories" and "sad pictures of children with runny noses and blue eyes". See Degenaar and Fourie (2024) for an extensive discussion of the concerns over lack of control and exposing children on interactive media.

Brand contact point integration

The findings showed participants' frustration and inability to fulfil increasingly unrealistic expectations and demands for communication to be custom designed for stakeholders as individuals. This was aptly put by a communication person who used phrases such as "we cannot be everything for everyone". In many instances, communication persons conduct self-directed research in their free time during the evenings after work. "My husband knows that I have to spend two to three hours extra each evening in front of the fireplace". The majority of communication persons confessed that compiling content for the diverse stakeholders was a "daily struggle", and they needed information from other staff who were already overloaded with their own work. A further issue highlighted by communication persons is the fact that social work jargon was often used, which complicates comprehension. They (social workers) would refer to "paternal grandfather, but I tell them, no, just say grandpa". The majority of the CPOs had only one person responsible for communication, marketing and fundraising of the CPO, and not necessarily a trained communication expert. As stated by two of the communication persons: "I think our organisation unfortunately is not one of those that have the luxury to be able to say you are only the media officer, or you are the only one writing the proposals. You need to be capable of doing different things" and be a "jack of all trades". The findings also showed an unrealistic expectation of the person responsible for the communication function, mostly comprising an individual, to understand, monitor and evaluate all contact points and stakeholder preferences as part of an isolated effort and without any budget. Social workers in focus groups especially believed that these activities were the responsibility of the "marketing person", as "we were appointed 'to do our job to protect children'". Although it is understandable due to these limitations, the CPO cannot disregard the many benefits of modern personalised strategic communication to build much-needed stakeholder relationships.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The above-mentioned findings contribute to the adaptation of the Niemann (2005) framework to ultimately develop a SIC framework for the CPO sector.

Key adaptations to the Niemann model

This article forms part of a PhD study (Degenaar, 2021) in which it was evident that most of the basic guidelines of the SIC are also applicable to and feasible in the CPO milieu. However, two key adaptations were necessary:

Due to the pervasive role that the confidentiality legislation plays in restricting communication practices, it was necessary to add a separate area of integration to account for the contextual factors impacting on the communication functions of CPOs. See Figure 2 and Degenaar (2021) and Degenaar et al. (2022) for a comprehensive exposition of the framework.

Second, more emphasis is placed on the unity of effort for innovative ways of communicating, not only by the person responsible for the communication function, but by everyone involved in the CPO, to achieve strategic consistency that ultimately assists with sustainability.

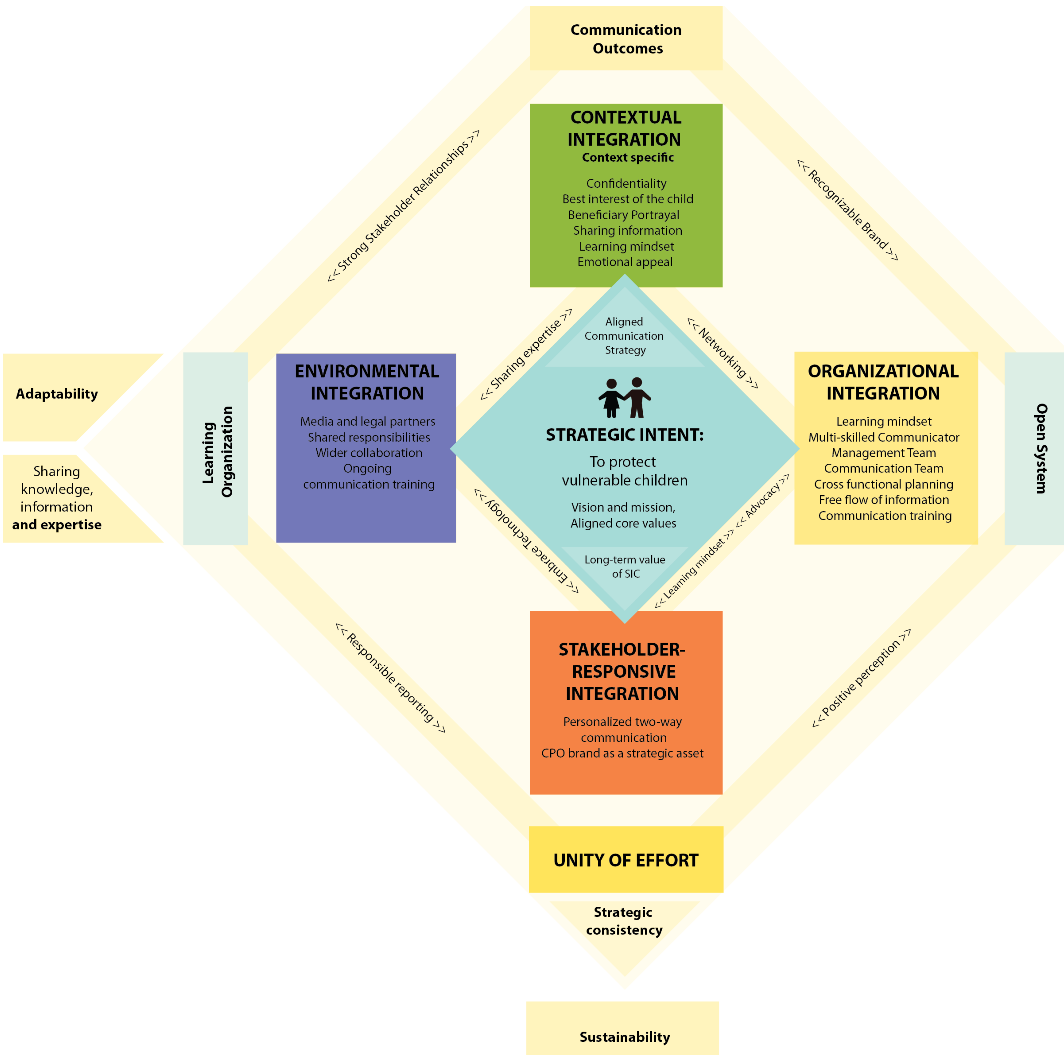

Figure 2: Adapted framework: A SIC framework for CPOs in South Africa (Degenaar, 2021)

Communication outcomes

It is argued that the communication outcomes of the SIC framework for the CPO sector would be strong stakeholder relationships, a recognisable brand, responsible reporting regarding child protection issues and, in the long run, a positive perception. This article focuses on the outcome of strong relationships.

Given the intricate nature of the environment in which the CPO function operates, there should also be an enabling environment to reach the communication outcomes.

Enablers of strategic intent

Five enablers should be used to achieve the strategic intent of safeguarding vulnerable children. These enablers include a learning mindset, sharing expertise, networking, advocacy and the embracing of technology (see Figure 2).

It is important for all functions within a CPO, including management, communication officers, social workers and external legal experts, to have a *learning mindset* to recognise the need to explore alternative methods of communication.

Online advocacy and *networking* should not only be done by employees, but by all persons involved in the CPO.

Child protection groups that face criticism can use online advocacy. Involving everyone in the organisation is a budget-friendly way to build relationships, connect with new supporters, correct misunderstandings and get valuable support. By sharing content on their personal profiles or engaging on social media, employees, board members and volunteers who are natural social media users can contribute to portraying the organisation's work in a more humanised and relatable way, fostering connections with peers, media and the public. See Degenaar and Fourie (2024) for an extensive discussion of the advantages and challenges of online advocacy for CPOs.

Unity of effort: The pillar of communication

A unity of effort among all persons involved in CPOs is the foundation for fusion of all four integration areas. This means that all staff (managers, board members and volunteers) should be able to contribute to the communication function. This would enable CPOs to appeal to a wider range of stakeholders while fulfilling stakeholder expectations.

As a result, a broader spectrum of stakeholders would realise the value of the work done by CPOs and accept their joint responsibility.

Stakeholder responsive integration

In this article, the focus is on stakeholder relationships and, as such, stakeholder integration was explored. It should, however, be kept in mind that the point of departure of the framework is that the different areas are interrelated and are all dependent on an enabling factor to achieve common communication outcomes.

Stakeholder responsiveness

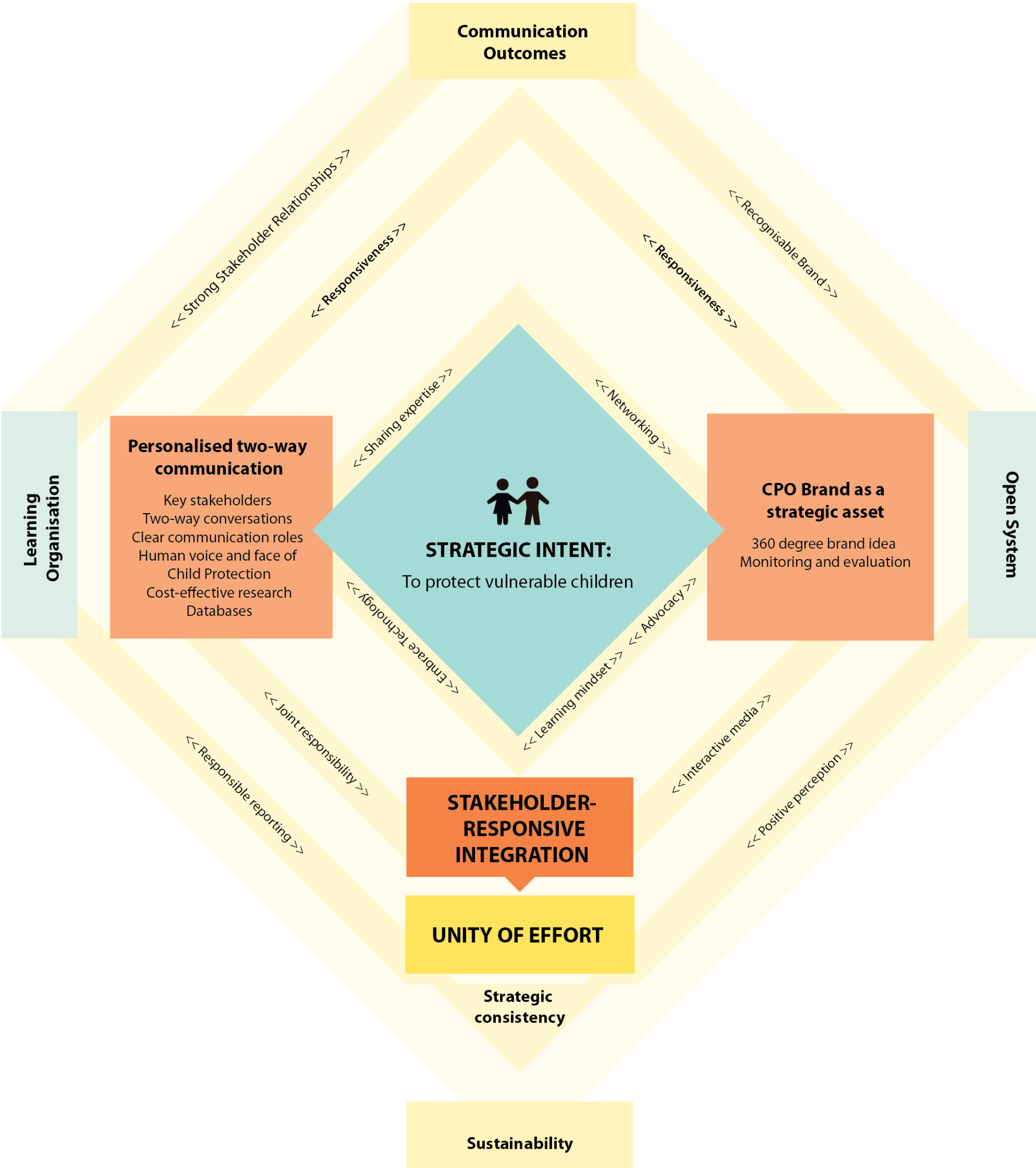

Figure 3: Stakeholder responsive integration area (Degenaar, 2021)

From the results, it was evident that full interactivity as suggested by Niemann (2005) was unattainable in the light of the limited resources and skills available, as well as the diverse set of stakeholders in the legally and ethically restricted context of CPOs. Hence, it is suggested that they initiate a more responsive approach to effectively integrate stakeholders (see Figure 3). Responsiveness is the ability of an organisation to listen to and address stakeholders' needs and concerns promptly and appropriately while being accountable for meeting their interests and needs (Gennari, 2020).

Accordingly, the adapted framework shows that personalised two-way communication and the brand as a strategic asset are inextricably linked to reach the strategic intent and, ultimately, the communication outcomes of a CPO.

Personalised two-way communication

From the findings, it follows that attempts are inhibited to involve diverse stakeholders in the proposed symmetrical open and balanced manner to create mutually beneficial relationships, while (a) adhering to legal stipulations regarding confidentiality; and given (b) the admissible focus on ethical conduct taking into account the best interest of the child; (c) various individuals and groups with different interests in CPOs; (d) unrealistic stakeholder expectations; (e) the fear of emotional manipulation; and (f) unclear communication roles.

Despite limitations, CPOs cannot disregard the many benefits of modern personalised strategic communication to build much-needed stakeholder relationships. Consequently, the following activities are recommended to facilitate personalised, two-way communication:

Key stakeholders

It is recommended that the framework identify and prioritise *key stakeholders*, instead of attempting to cater to everyone's needs. Besides the Department of Social Development, where CPOs typically have limited control, it is essential for them to prioritise relationship-building efforts to engage with stakeholders, who may also serve as supporters, across the broader public, the corporate sector and the media environment.

Focus on two-way conversations

Two-way conversations should be prioritised to ensure that stakeholders' viewpoints are acknowledged, and that they are reassured. While conventional two-way symmetrical communication may be challenging, these conversations should serve as platforms to convey the needs of the CPO, rather than solely focusing on stakeholder expectations.

Clear communication roles

CPOs should establish clear communication roles for all employees and individuals involved in the organisation, to define responsibilities and expectations from the different role players. Role clarification and accompanying enablement of roles are necessary steps for CPOs to follow a more integrated approach to communication. When roles and responsibilities are transparent to all, everyone should be aware of who is accountable for responding or how to redirect the questioner or complainant to a more appropriate spokesperson. This could include a link to online information to answer the most frequently asked questions, which would enable them to promptly respond to online inquiries and complaints, albeit within legal and ethical parameters.

Human voice and face of child protection

This entails that communication should not only be seen in terms of financial reporting and delivering high-quality social work services – but also with a stronger focus on more open sharing of other information about children to achieve mutually beneficial and long-term trusting relationships with stakeholders. The likelihood of donors being motivated to contribute funds to CPOs due to their trust in its integrity and appreciation for its transparent communication is greater than the chances of them solely pursuing personal gratification or tangible rewards. It is thus essential for CPOs to continuously adapt and explore innovative ways of communication, considering the limited resources and increasing demands they face. By leveraging the power of new media, CPOs can demonstrate their commitment to stakeholder engagement and effectively communicate the value and impact of their child protection services, within legal and ethical parameters. This links back to fostering a learning mindset within CPOs to employ emotional appeal storytelling that can secure support for CPOs by personalising communication and portraying children as the beneficiaries.

External stakeholders are encouraged to be more involved in CPOs as part of a joint/shared responsibility to protect children at risk. As part of the learning mindset, alternative out-of-the-box ways of communicating to give a human voice and face to child protection are explored, to continuously get stakeholders involved in CPOs by connecting with them on a more personal level.

Cost-effective research to compile databases

By conducting research (see Duncan & Moriarty, 1997), CPOs can identify personalised communication approaches, determine effective communication channels and understand stakeholder interests. This is important for relationship building and creating brand awareness. Modern technology provides cost-effective opportunities for this purpose.

As formal research is cost-effective, *research* to compile databases is suggested. For example, self-created online surveys or at least a small percentage of the budget allocation to purchase the basic software with accompanied training would be a good start.

CPO brand as a strategic asset

Equally important, the results lead to a stronger emphasis on unity of effort to ensure that CPO brand is seen as a strategic asset by everyone involved, without shifting the responsibility of brand awareness to the person responsible for the communication function.

360-degree brand idea

By emphasising the *360-degree brand idea* by which everyone involved in the CPO integrates stakeholders at any contact point, be it during personal contact or online, during telephone conversations or writing a court report, the perceived unattainability of customised messages and delivery systems can be addressed.

Monitoring and evaluation

A point often overlooked in CPOs is that measuring and evaluation (M&E) processes should be strategically analysed against the goals of the aligned communication strategy.

The data gathered could assist the person responsible for the communication function to determine the interests and preferences of individual stakeholders in their quest to communicate more strategically. These goals should not be formulated in isolation, but should support the organisation's strategic goals and form a prominent part of management and financial decisions.

CONCLUSION

The SIC model of Niemann (2005) was taken as the point of departure to answer the research question posed: How can a strategic integrated communication approach to stakeholder relationships be adapted to be suitable to the CPO sector? Results reflected that for a context-specific CPO, not all of the guidelines of the SIC model are attainable. An adapted framework for the CPO context was proposed and thereby contributes to the theoretical body of knowledge on SIC. Effective communication relies on seamless collaboration across contextual, organisational, stakeholder and environmental integration domains. These interconnected areas work together to achieve communication outcomes and foster relationship building. The SIC framework indicates interrelatedness to achieve communication outcomes that build strong relationships, create a recognisable brand, report responsibly on child protection issues and, in the long run, reinforce a positive public perception. Given the intricate nature of the environment in which the CPO function operates, various factors contribute to the communication outcomes. Five enablers should be used to achieve the strategic intent of safeguarding vulnerable children. These include a learning mindset, sharing expertise, networking, advocacy and the embracing of technology.

The findings clearly indicate that achieving full interactivity, as proposed by Niemann (2005), was not feasible due to constraints such as limited resources, skills and the diverse range of stakeholders within the legally and ethically restricted context of CPOs. Therefore, it is recommended that a more responsive approach be initiated to integrate stakeholders effectively. Stronger emphasis should be placed on establishing long-term trusting relationships and a recognisable brand with stakeholders through stakeholder responsiveness. The CPO SIC framework highlights the importance of personalised two-way communication and the brand as a strategic asset, both of which are inextricably intertwined. This should be guided by unity of effort as the pillar of all communication efforts through strategic consistency. This emphasis is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of CPOs.

By implementing the guidelines of the adapted SIC framework, CPOs can effectively engage with stakeholders, improve and build stronger relationships and secure ongoing support, while navigating legal and ethical considerations. This can ultimately enhance the success and effectiveness of the organisation's child protection efforts.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although input from practice was gathered to compile this framework, it was only explored and has not yet been implemented in practice. Recommendations for future research can be made based on the SIC framework. The proposed framework could be further explored by being implemented in practice, with a focus on alternative organisational structures and the perception of external key stakeholders in the light of fundraising and sustainability. Further research would benefit communication scholars and South African society, ultimately playing a crucial role in advocating for our vulnerable children who cannot speak for themselves.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

REFERENCES

ACVV. (2023). Cutting child protection services threatens everyone's safety. Western Cape Child Protection Alliance press statement. *ACVV*, 29 May. Available from: https://www.acvv.org.za/latest-news/cutting-child-protection-services-threatens-everyones-safety/

Benecke, D.R. & Holtzhausen, L. (2018). Public relations in the South African non-profit sector: Partnerships for social change. In N. Garsten & I. Bruce (eds). *Communicating causes: Strategic public relations for the non-profit sector*. New York, NY: Routledge, 229–240.

Bosley, C. (2014). *Two-way symmetrical communication in a non-profit organization*. Masters thesis. San Diego: San Diego State University.

Broom, G.M. & Sha, B.L. (2013). *Cutlip & Center's effective public relations*. 11th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Chauke, G. & Du Plessis, D. (2013). Public relations. In G. Angelopulo & R. Barker (eds). *Integrated organisational communication*. 2nd ed. Cape Town: Juta, 222–255.

Clayton, A. (2017). *The great fundraising masterclass 2017*. University of Stellenboch Business School, 12–13 September 2017.

Damons, M. (2023). Child protection services raise alarm on funding shortfalls. *GroundUp*, 31 May. Available from: https://www.groundup.org.za/article/child-protection-organisations-forced-to-make-cuts-have-high-staff-turnover-and-closure-of-offices-amid-call-for-better-state-funding/

Davis, P. (2018). What is the difference between personalization and customization? *AtData*, 5 November. Available from: https://atdata.com/blog/what-is-the-difference-between-personalization-and-customization/

Degenaar, A. (2021). A strategic integrated communication framework for the Child Protection Organisation in South Africa. Doctoral thesis. Potchefstroom: North-West University (South Africa).

Degenaar, A. & Fourie, L.M. (2024). A strategic integrated communication framework for child protection organizations in South Africa: The role of digital media. Unpublished manuscript. Cape Town: AOSIS Publishers.

Degenaar, A., Fourie, L.M. & Holtzhausen, L. (2022). A strategic integrated communication framework for child protection organizations in South Africa. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 16(5):700–721. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2022.2093204

Denner, N., Viererbl, B. & Koch, T. (2019). A matter for the boss? How personalized communication affects recipients' perceptions of an organization during a crisis. *International Journal of Communication*, 13:2026–2044.

Department of Social Development. (2024). *NPO register.* Available from: http://www.npo.gov.za/

Duncan, T. (2002). IMC: *Using advertising and promotion to build brand*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Duncan, T. & Moriarty, S. 1997. *Driving brand value: Using integrated marketing to manage profitable stakeholder relationships*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Engelbrecht, R. & Ngongo, M. (2018). Storytelling for social media platforms. In M. Pritchard & K. Sitto (eds). Connect: *Writing for digital audiences*. Cape Town: Juta, 206–230.

Enslin, C. (2005). T*he role of alternative brand contact planning in the South African marketing and communication industry*. Doctoral thesis. Pretoria: University of Pretoria. Available from: http://hdl.handle.net/2263/26108

Forrest, S. (2013). Negative public images hamper child welfare investigators. *University of Illinois Urbana Campaign*, 14 March. Available from: https://socialwork.illinois.edu/negative-public-images-hamper-child-welfare-investigators/

Franklin, B. & Parton, N. (1991). *Social work, the media and public relations*. London: Routledge.

Freberg, K. (2018). *Social media for strategic communication*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Gastrow, S. (2019). The proliferation of non-profits is an indication of state failure. *Daily Maverick*, 8 October. Available from: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2019-10-08-the-proliferation-of-non-profits-is-an-indication-of-state-failure/

Gennari, F. 2020. Responsiveness. In Idowu, S., Schmidpeter, R., Capaldi, N., Zu, L., Del Baldo,M. & Abreu, R. (eds). *Encyclopedia of sustainable management*. Cham: Springer. https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-030-02006-4_979-1.pdf

Grunig, J.E. (2013). Excellence theory. A comprehensive look at modern public relations theory. *James Grunig*: Available from: https://excellencetheory.wordpress.com/2013/09/27/the-two-way-symmetrical-model-of-communication/

Heide, M., Von Platen, S., Simonsson, C. & Falkheimer, J. (2018). Expanding the scope of strategic communication: Towards a holistic understanding of orgnanizational complexity. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4):452–468.

Holtzhausen, L. (2013). Managing corporate identities of non-profit organisations in the social welfare sector. *Jàmbá: Journal of Disaster Risk Studies*, 5(2):1–8.

Karvonen, L. (2010). *The personalisation of politics: A study of parliamentary democracies*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Klein, K. (2007). *Fundraising for social change*. 5th ed. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Maboya, M. & McKay, T. (2019). The financial sustainability challenges facing the South African non-profit sector. *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, 15(1):a693. Available from: https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v15i1.693

Meleyal, L. (2017). It's time to put social work regulation where it belongs – with employers. *The Guardian*, 23 January. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2017/jan/23/social-work-regulation-employers

Morsing, M. & Schultz, M. (2006). Corporate social responsibility communication: Stakeholder information, response and involvement strategies. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 15(4):323–338. Available from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1467-8608.2006.00460.x

Network for Good. (2017). *Storytelling for nonprofits: How to present stories that attract donors, win support, and raise more money*. Available from: https://learn.networkforgood.com/storytelling-for-nonprofits-2017.html

Nhedz, F. & Makofane, M. (2015). The experiences of social workers in the provision of family preservation services. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 51(3):354–378.

Niemann, I. (2005). *Strategic integrated communication: Towards a South African conceptual model*. Doctoral thesis. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.

Niemann-Struweg, I. (2015). Integrated communication implementation. In D. Mulder & I. Niemann-Struweg (eds.). *Strategic integrated communication*. Pretoria: Van Schaik, 213–228.

Norton, M. (2003). *The worldwide fundraiser's handbook*. 2nd ed. London: Directory of Social Change.

Nwauche, S. & Flanigan, S. (2022). Challenges to nonprofit organization participation in social and development policy planning in South Africa. *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, 13(2):119–139.

Overton-De Klerk, N. & Verwey, S. (2013). Towards an emerging paradigm of strategic communication: Core driving forces. *Communicatio*, 39(3):362–382.

Patel, L. (2012). Developmental social policy, social welfare services and the non-profit sector in South Africa. *Social Policy & Administration*, 46(6):603–618.

Rensburg, R. & Cant, M. (2009). *Public relations: African perspectives*. Johannesburg: Heinemann.
Richardson, M.K. 2017. Two sides of the same coin: The reinforcing relationship between communications and development. *NonProfitPro*, 6 April. Availabe from: https://www.nonprofitpro.com/article/two-sides-coin- reinforcing-relationship-communications-development/
Sjöström, S. & Öhman, A. (2018). What if an investigative journalist calls? Media Relations in social work. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 48(7):2077–2095. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx148
South African Council for Social Services Professions (SACSSP). (2020). *South African Council for Social Service Professions code of ethics*. Available from: http://www.sacssp.co.za/professional-conduct-and-ethics-2/
The Media Monitoring Project. (2004). *Children dying to make the news*. Available from: https://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Children-Dying-to-make_-2003-1.pdf
Türkel, S., Uzunoğlu, E. & Misci Kip, S. (2021). Shared meaning at the intersection of NPO reputation and trust: A personification perspective. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 26(1):124–142.
Van Baalen, A. & Mulder, D. (2016). A conceptual analysis of integrated communication. *Communitas*, 21(89):89–107.
Van Ruler, B. (2018). Communication theory: An underrated pillar on which strategic communication rests. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4):367–381.
Wang, A. (2007). When web pages influence web usability: Effects of online strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(2):93–106.
Welliver, S. (2020). A journalist's guide on what to write — and what not to — when covering child abuse. *Poynter*, 4 February. Available from: https://www.poynter.org/ethics-trust/2020/a-journalists-guide-on-what-to-write-and-what-not-to-when-covering-child-abuse/
Wimmer, R.D. & Dominick, J.R. (2006). *Mass media research: An introduction*. 8th ed. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth.

GPTs and Digital Superintermediaries: Dynamics, Dilemmas, Dangers of Generative AI: A Conceptual Framework

AUTHOR(S)
Caroline Muyaluka Azionya
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1051-274X

PUBLISHED ONLINE
Volume 44 (1) May 2025
Pages 92-106
Submitted April 2024
Accepted March 2025

DOI
10.36615/7s3kt098

ISSN
Online 2957-7950
Print 0259-0069

Abstract

The arms race in generative artificial intelligence and artificial intelligence has transformed digital markets, with artificial-intelligence-powered platforms projected to drive market growth to nearly $740 billion by 2030. However, scholarly understanding of how these technologies affect platform competition remains limited. This article explores how generative pre-trained transformers influence digital superintermediaries' market power, and examines whether generative artificial intelligence capabilities reinforce or challenge existing platform dominance. Using a conceptual literature analysis of platforms and artificial intelligence development patterns, the research uncovers a critical paradox: While generative pre-trained transformers represent revolutionary advancement, they create novel forms of artificial intelligence market concentration. The findings reveal how digital superintermediaries leverage artificial-intelligence-powered platforms through control over computational resources and data access, creating self-reinforcing cycles of artificial intelligence capability enhancement. This research demonstrates how artificial intelligence capabilities, particularly generative pre-trained transformers, create new mechanisms of market power consolidation, suggesting the need for innovative regulatory approaches that address the unique characteristics of generative artificial-intelligence-enhanced digital multisided platforms.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence (AI), AI market concentration, AI-powered platforms, digital superintermediaries, generative AI, generative pre-trained transformers (GPTs)

INTRODUCTION

Andreessen (2011), an industry expert, envisaged that software would be the engine of growth and value creation that would be applied in every industry. Andreessen (2011) predicted a period when virtually all human tasks would depend on software and become digitalised. Likewise, Ghodsi (2023), CEO of Databricks, predicts that in roughly 10 years, the disruptive effects of artificial intelligence (AI) will be unfathomable and will make software intelligent. Notably, since November 2022, the exponential growth and widespread use of generative pre-trained transformers (GPTs) among consumers, a type of generative AI, has sparked an AI arms race among a group of powerful digital multisided platforms operating as digital superintermediaries. In 2023 alone, a record $29.1 billion was invested across 691 generative AI projects, which represents a 268.4% increase in deal value over 2022's total (Hodgson, 2024). Consequently, the AI market is projected to grow to nearly $740 billion by 2030 (Statista, 2024). Simultaneously, there is an ongoing battle in the AI landscape that is dominated by companies in the United States (US). OpenAI, one of the dominant brands in the AI race linked with Microsoft, is forging ahead in creating newer models with greater functionality. OpenAI has enabled its GPT-4o ("o" for Omni) with multimodalities that accept text or image inputs. OpenAI o1 is a reasoning model designed to allocate more time to thinking before generating responses, enhancing its ability to tackle complex problems in coding, mathematics, and science. Similarly, OpenAI is preparing to release agentic AI capable of autonomously planning and performing complicated activities (Kolt, 2024).

Simultaneously, Microsoft has embedded AI across all its platforms. Google has responded with Gemini 2.0, an agentic AI model capable of understanding its environment, planning multiple steps ahead and completing tasks with minimal human supervision (Pichal, 2024). Meta released LLaMA 3 open-source software and introduced several chatbots on all its social media platforms to intensify the competition (Al-Amin et al., 2024; Meta LLaMA 3, 2024). Concurrently, Amazon is investing heavily in Anthropic to ensure it remains competitive in the ongoing AI technology race. Claude 3.5, Anthropic's latest model, achieves near-human performance in complex tasks, thereby advancing general intelligence (Anthropic, 2024). Analysts also posit that, as AI gains momentum, individuals seeking information online will gravitate towards platforms embedded with generative AI. For example, OpenAI Search GPT, a new AI search engine, can potentially challenge Google's dominance in the search engine market. Apple's generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) offering, Apple Intelligence, is reportedly "two years behind its competitors" (Market Insider, 2024). China's open-source DeepSeek is the notable challenger to the American dominated AI landscape as its models outperform the incumbent Open AI on various parameters. These companies, collectively and coupled with the rapid acceleration of their AI advancements and models, are disrupting and transforming daily life and reshaping the corporate landscape. Their GPTs are redefining how individuals live, work and interact with one another using their general problem-solving applications – horizontal AI – and specific industry solutions – vertical AI (Dehouche, 2021; Kolade et al., 2023).

This technological shift, which Zerfass et al. (2018:496) describe as an example of "environment-driven strategic complexity", underscores the necessity for strategic communicators to anticipate and adapt with agility to these innovations to remain effective in a rapidly evolving, vague, risky and complex digital ecosystem.

Zerfass et al. (2018:493) broadly define strategic communication in this way:

> All communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity … [or] the purposeful use of communication by an organisation or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals.

AI-powered superintermediaries enhance message crafting, dissemination and evaluation through advanced analytics for real-time feedback and personalised engagement (Cropley, 2024). The influence of AI on strategic communication extends beyond technological and tactical implementation. It influences how organisations or entities present and promote themselves through deliberate activities that utilise the "strategic calculus as their defining perspective" to achieve their objectives and ensure sustained success (Zerfass et al., 2018:502).

For end users, AI benefits include recommendation systems in e-commerce platforms that tailor suggestions based on consumer behaviour. In addition, conversational AI provides round-the-clock support through chatbots and virtual assistants that can interpret natural language commands to perform tasks such as scheduling appointments or reading emails aloud. AI tools such as ChatGPT are revolutionising strategic communication praxis by automating processes and workflows and augmenting practitioners' capabilities. Furthermore, intelligent user interfaces (IUIs) powered by machine-learning methods are transforming human–machine interactions and how entities across various sectors engage in "conversations of strategic significance" (Zerfass et al., 2018:493) with stakeholders, especially regarding their community relations and crisis management programmes (Moore & Hübscher, 2021). The nature of hyper-personalised interaction displayed by and on superintermediaries' digital platforms raises pertinent questions about whether their brand of persuasion constitutes control, nudging or influence (Moore & Hübscher, 2021).

The research gap

While scholars have extensively examined the economics of digital multisided platforms (MSPs) (Belleflamme & Peitz, 2021) and the technical capabilities of AI (Wilson & Daugherty, 2018), there remains a critical gap in how AI capabilities, particularly GPTs, reshape platform competition dynamics. Previous research has focused primarily on network effects and data advantages in digital markets (Kenney & Zysman, 2020). However, it has not fully addressed how developing advanced AI capabilities might create new forms of market concentration that transcend traditional platform economics. Moreover, while studies have investigated the technical aspects of GPTs (Dehouche, 2021), their potential role in reinforcing or disrupting existing digital market structures remains understudied. This gap is particularly significant given the unprecedented scale of AI investments and the potential for GPTs to fundamentally alter the competitive landscape of digital markets. This article contributes to filling this research gap by employing a conceptual framework that integrates diverse areas of interest to forecast future developments. The framework is used to analyse the emergence and implications of AI-powered GPT superintermediaries.

APPROACH

This approach used in this study proves particularly appropriate for investigating emerging technological phenomena as it enables the synthesis of theoretical insights across disciplines during periods of rapid technological change (Webster & Watson, 2002). The conceptual review approach facilitates identifying and analysing patterns in digital platform evolution with AI capabilities while drawing meaningful theoretical connections across computer science, economics, communication sciences and digital studies. The analytical process follows Jaakkola's (2020) conceptual research framework, which encompasses identifying key constructs across disciplines, the analysis of relationships between these constructs, and the development of new theoretical insights about AI capabilities' influence on digital platform dynamics. This article starts by defining GPTs, and then discusses the rise and hegemony of AI-powered digital superintermediaries, their characteristics and challenges before concluding with predictions.

WHAT ARE GENERATIVE PRE-TRAINED TRANSFORMERS?

GPTs belong to a group of neural network models that use natural language processing (NLP) and GenAI to comprehend and analyse human language and produce text, images or other media in response to prompts (Harvard Online, 2023). GenAI is a transformer-based large language model (LLM). GPTs employ a transformer architecture to forecast or predict the following word or token in a given sequence (Roisenzvit, 2023). For the computer to understand text, phrases or paragraphs, the GPTs break it down into individual words or tokens. In this way, it breaks down natural language into digestible chunks.

Simply put, GPT technology uses NLP to convert unstructured input such as texts, photos and audio into normalised, structured data that can be used for analysis. The goal of NLP is to instruct computers to understand words or phrases written in human languages (Khurana et al., 2023). GPTs use an attention mechanism, much like the human brain, to process all tokens concurrently and calculate the attention weights between them at subsequent levels. Tokens describe the total number of words, regardless of repetition rate, in a text corpus (Turner, 2015).

GPTs use attention mechanisms to break down problems into attention-based reasoning tasks, focusing on specific subsets (Hernández & Amigó, 2021). GPTs generate responses based on user commands (Kalla et al., 2023), which enables content creation, query understanding and the solving of complex societal issues. Beyond synthetic content generation, GPTs can build AI agents capable of autonomously navigating the Internet and performing various online activities, including acting as automated personal assistants (Kolt, 2024).

GPTs are trained on massive unstructured data at scale and are fine-tuned for specific tasks. Initially trained on extensive Internet-sourced data, GPTs are refined through reinforcement learning based on user input (Shumailov et al., 2023). This fine-tuning enhances their proficiency and specialisation (Kamnis, 2023), enabling the models to generalise language structures and patterns for different projects. Despite the impressive nature of these capabilities, it is important to raise questions about computational bias and the replication of results. The reliance on training data from existing sources can perpetuate historical biases and limit creative and innovative thinking (Dehouche, 2021).

Furthermore, these models' black-box nature raises significant concerns about the transparency and accountability displayed in the decision-making processes. Algorithmic bias is the phenomenon witnessed when a machine-learning model consistently yields incorrect results over time (Nelson, 2019). As GPTs are deployed in decision making, how do we ensure that they are always transparent? Transparency entails that AI authors must explain not only what went into an algorithm and what its output is but also the decisions they took and the reasoning behind them (Nelson, 2019). These reflect more significant cultural discussions on race, representation and technology and draw attention to the difficulties faced by AI developers in striking a balance between representation and avoiding the perpetuation of prejudices or biases (Umbrello, 2024).

Datafication

In the era of AI, data plays a more crucial role than ever. Data is a critical enterprise asset, value creator and currency for competitiveness over rivals. Datafication is the conversion of social action into online quantified data that enables real-time monitoring and forecasting (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013). Datafication as a concept suggests that the behaviours, attention spans and conduct of individuals are converted into measurements that are inputted into big data networks, enabling improved tracking and statistical evaluation across technological and societal domains. In addition, real-time quantifiable data can also be gleaned from observing, tracking and converting customer brand experiences and other interactions (Azionya, 2022a). Data mining and application are fundamental to understanding the real value of data (Gu, 2023). However, this commodification of personal data raises fundamental questions about privacy rights and democratic control. The assumption that data-driven decision making inherently leads to better outcomes requires careful scrutiny, particularly given the opacity of algorithmic processes. A case in point is the algorithmic study and commodification of user interactions on digital MSPs such as Meta, Google and Amazon. Therefore, user-generated behavioural metrics and demographic data are monetised by digital superintermediaries using a synthesis of platform users' digital footprints. These sophisticated targeting mechanisms use precision-targeted marketing initiatives to generate considerable financial returns for the digital superintermediaries. Consumer interactions generate big data through online, mobile and data-driven services (Huberty, 2015), which platforms analyse using machine learning and deep learning algorithms. For example, e-commerce platforms employ machine learning for sales forecasting and deep learning for analysing user sentiment and generating recommendations (Sarker, 2021; Taherdoost & Madanchian, 2023). Consequently, even in perfectly competitive markets, the organisation with access to superior data has a competitive advantage. With the ongoing AI arms race, the importance of data and data centres cannot be overemphasised.

Data centre

Data centres are places where data is stored, processed and released in real time. Most data centres consist of computing, storage and network infrastructures. While no individual, firm or brand is precluded from owning digital infrastructure, such as data centres, the mega data centres worldwide are owned and managed by digital superintermediaries such as Amazon Web Services (AWS), Microsoft Azure and Google Cloud, resulting in what is often called cloud data centres. The prohibitive costs of establishing and operating data centres create significant barriers to entry for new companies, more so for those based in Africa. In addition, the lack of capital investments in African infrastructure is a further barrier. Currently, venture capital investments in Africa's digital startups are less than 1% of the global total (Robinson & Bhatia, 2025). Despite this challenge, Africa's digital economy exhibits potential for growth but is constrained by structural challenges, including the external control of its Internet infrastructure and reliance on global tech giants for essential digital services such as cloud computing and AI capabilities (African Union, 2020; World Bank Group, 2024). This external control exacerbates technological dependencies (Robinson & Bhatia) and compounds existing digital divides across the continent.

Big tech's dominance of the data centre space has the self-serving purpose of managing data and AI model training. Therefore, propriety data centres provide essential computing power through specialised hardware for processing multiple data streams simultaneously (Gilani, 2025) to help maintain their dominance. This concentration of computational resources entrenches digital superintermediaries' market position, which reinforces their AI capabilities and market dominance. To counter this AI market concentration in Africa, "data centre infrastructure" and investments "designed to host mission critical servers and computer systems, with fully redundant subsystems" (African Union, 2020:11) are needed for context-specific solutions to achieve significant scale. As the influence and dominance of these organisations grow, it is important to examine the mechanisms through which AI-powered digital superintermediaries rise to prominence and establish their hegemony in the digital economy.

THE RISE AND HEGEMONY OF AI-POWERED DIGITAL SUPERINTERMEDIARIES

Digital superintermediaries

The term digital superintermediaries refers to a set of tech giants far above ordinary digital intermediaries, middlemen and brokers in the digital economy (Azionya, 2022a; Overton-de Klerk, 2023). These digital MSPs are the result of the fusion of social interaction and exponential fourth industrial revolution (4IR) technology. Digital superintermediaries possess considerable market power, making it difficult to displace them from their dominant positions. Based on their strong financial position, these digital behemoths have the ability to act significantly and independently of their rivals, clients and, ultimately, end users (Franck & Peitz, 2023). It is on this note that the European Commission (2023) has singled out several US brands, namely Google (Alphabet), Apple, Meta, Microsoft and Amazon, and among them one Chinese company, ByteDance, and named them gatekeepers of the digital economy. A digital gatekeeper is a platform that allows some users to access only certain goods or only certain users at certain times (Alexiadis & de Streel, 2020). This raises concerns regarding the concentration of power in the hands of a few oligopolists. Therefore, digital superintermediaries, who exhibit monopolistic and self-preferring inclinations, serve as gatekeepers in the 4IR and are the champions of AI. It is crucial to understand the characteristics of digital superintermediaries to grasp how these powerful entities shape the digital economy and influence market dynamics. This is depicted in Figure 1 (Digital superintermediaries power and value flow).

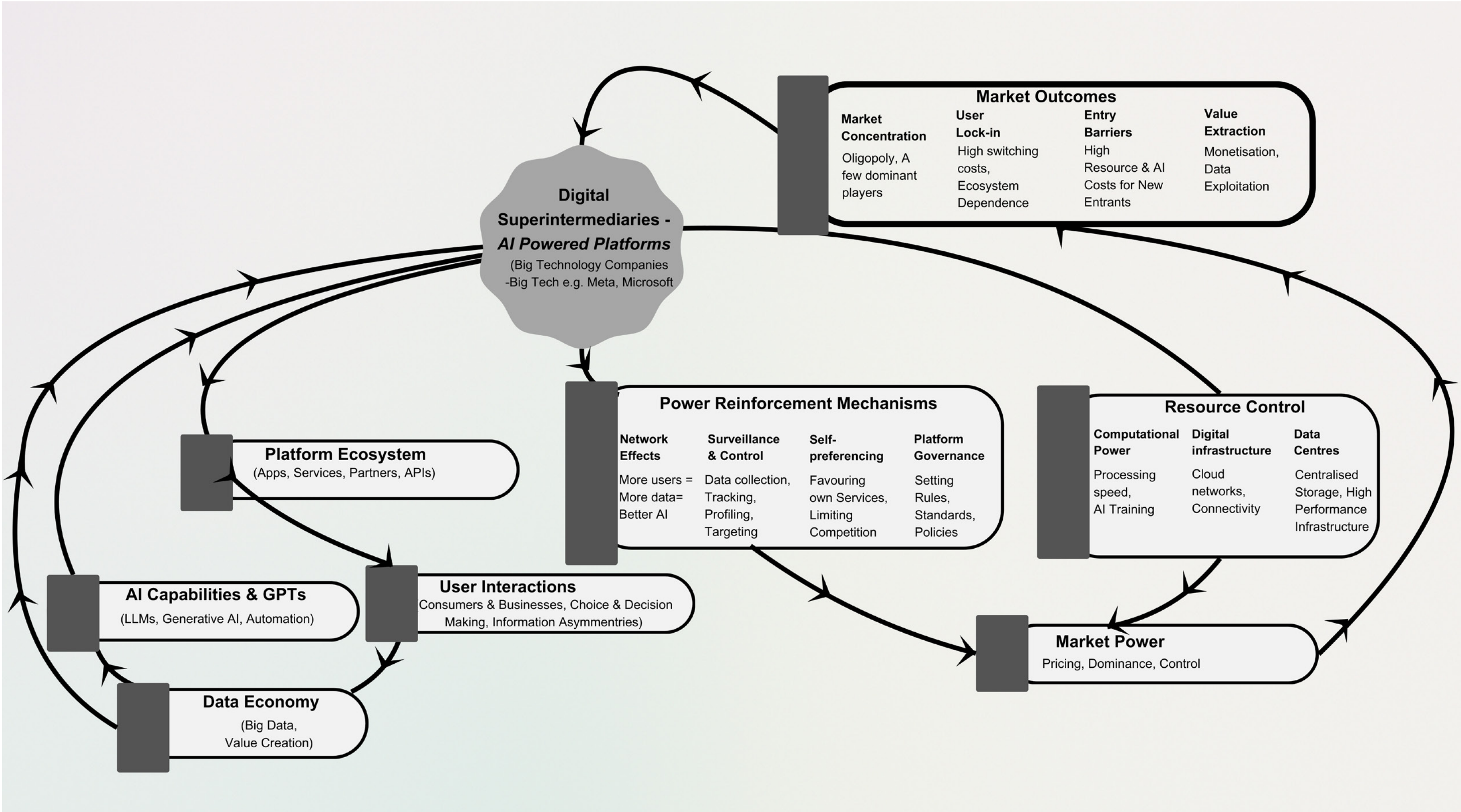

Figure 1: Digital superintermediaries power and value flow

CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGITAL SUPERINTERMEDIARIES

Although the list is not exhaustive, the subsequent section discusses important characteristics of superintermediaries. Characteristics include their approach to preferencing, competition, ecosystems, choice and decision making, data and related concepts, and network effects.

DIGITAL SUPERINTERMEDIARIES ACT AS SELF-PREFERENCERS

Self-preferencing is the practice of a major provider of core platform services favouring their own goods and services over those provided by rivals on the same platform (Colangelo, 2022; Hutchinson & Treščáková, 2022). For example, Apple and Google have been accused of favouring their own apps while demanding disproportionate access fees from app developers. The gatekeepers gain substantive enduring market power in the intermediation services market, which has a significant impact on the underlying market or markets and is essential for users on all sides of the platform (Büchel & Rusche, 2020). Users pay extra costs and charges for the use of digital MSPs that can restrict their migration to competitors. Platform owners impose a substantial amount of listing fees and (ad valorem) commissions on app developers. Ad valorem is a tariff rate expressed as a proportion of the price (WTO, 2023). These represent 30% of revenues on the App Store and Google Play in the first year and 15% in future years (Padilla et al., 2022). They also charge advertisers who advertise their products on their platform and customers who access the list of advertised prices on their platform. The business models of digital superintermediaries demonstrate how market power is reinforced through strategic pricing mechanisms.

AI-enhanced business models build and maintain market power

Business models of digital superintermediaries demonstrate a sophisticated interplay between traditional platform economics and AI capabilities. These AI-enabled business models operate through interdependent customer relationships, where AI enhances both supply-side and demand-side interactions (Ardolino et al., 2020; Climent et al., 2024). Superintermediaries can shore up their platforms by making one side free while letting the other side pay (Azionya, 2022a). This policy of “plug-and-play” for the sides that are free, otherwise known as zero price market, and “pay-to-play” for the other sides of their platforms is often known as a non-neutral price mechanism. Azionya (2022a) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Interim Report (2018) highlight how non-neutral pricing systems create market imbalances, where users with lower price sensitivity face inflated charges while other segments experience below-cost pricing across different sides of the market. The integration of AI has transformed the traditional “plug-and-play” and “pay-to-play” dynamics in several ways.

For instance, in most cases, the free tier provides basic features that generate valuable training data to improve the model (e.g. the free version of ChatGPT). The premium tier involves a paid subscription with advanced capabilities and privileges (for instance, the $20 paid version), and an enterprise tier is customised using AI solutions with enhanced computing power (requires a quote). As Lianos and Carballa-Smichowski (2022) note, this effectively means that advertising revenue and premium subscriptions in the AI-enhanced marketplace offset the cost of providing free AI services; enterprise services create business-to-business (B2B) lock-in while simultaneously strengthening the superintermediaries’ AI capabilities and market position.

The AI-enhanced business model generates more robust network effects than traditional platform models (Climent & Haftor, 2021; Gregory et al., 2021) due to several synergistic factors: the data generated by free users enhances AI performance across all tiers, advanced AI features increase switching costs for users, enterprise-level AI integration fosters technological lock-in and continuous improvements in AI capabilities incrementally augment the overall value proposition of the platform. Unlike traditional digital platform business models that rely on interaction, AI-enhanced business models uniquely leverage data feedback loops to improve continuously and create stronger technological dependencies among users. These models benefit from data network effects, where the more users interact with the AI service, the more data are generated, which in turn enhances AI performance (Climent & Haftor, 2021; Gregory et al., 2021). This creates a virtuous cycle where better AI performance attracts more users.

Data network effects

Like traditional digital platforms, digital superintermediaries are digital infrastructures characterised by network effects. Network externalities, also known as network effects, represent a phenomenon where a component, element, system or product's value increases exponentially with its user base, creating positive externalities for all participants. The telephone is the standard illustration whose utility increases logarithmically as the number of users increases. Digital superintermediaries have successfully used 4IR technologies to create natural monopolies around their brands, which have a constant increase in return on the value of the network. Digital superintermediaries tend to exhibit low variable costs as more users join their network. Low variable costs and network externalities can generate enormous profits through viral expansion, otherwise known as critical mass. For example, Amazon benefits from network effects when more providers and consumers join the network. And as more providers and consumers/users join, its value improves.

Gregory et al. (2023) propose a new type of network effect, termed data network effects, which have arisen due to advancements in AI and the increasing availability of data. Gregory et al. (2023:534) contend that "a platform exhibits data network effects if the more that the platform learns from the data it collects on users, the more valuable the platform becomes to each user". This creates a virtuous cycle where better AI performance attracts more users.

However, network effects have some potential drawbacks. Network effects have strengthened the market dominance of digital superintermediaries, reduced competition and innovation, and created path dependence, which makes it difficult for customers to switch from one platform to another. Specifically, advanced AI features can create higher switching costs for users by integrating deeply into their workflows or offering unique functionalities that competitors cannot easily replicate. Whenever critical mass is reached and a strong network effect is enabled, digital superintermediaries can acquire significant market power. This allows them to dominate supply chains, influence prices and create asymmetric relations in value networks (Azionya, 2022a).

Competition

The argument for being positive about competition in the digital economy hinges on the possibility that incumbents could be caught off guard by the disruptive innovation of a small startup company or an unanticipated technological change. However, digital superintermediaries are hardly dislodged that way. They have both the financial and technological capabilities to clone new products or services, crowd out smaller competitors or simply buy the fledgling company to stifle competition. The capacity that they have over other conventional businesses or ordinary digital intermediaries is severely diminished when it comes to rivalry with other digital superintermediaries due to the significant repercussions of customer lock-in effects (Büchel & Rusche, 2020). Digital superintermediaries also distinguish themselves through their capacity to establish and orchestrate value-creating ecosystems.

Ecosystem

Platform ecosystems, emblematic of 4IR, emerge from cross-boundary interactions among interdependent customers, fundamentally transforming business strategy in the digital economy (Tang & Qian, 2020). At their foundation lies the value proposition, which delineates the ecosystem's endogenous boundaries (Adner, 2017) and serves as the primary mechanism for attracting or repelling interdependent participants. Within these ecosystems, users engage in cooperative value creation and co-creation processes, simultaneously generating value for themselves and the broader network. The resultant economic benefits manifest through enhanced efficiency, stimulated innovation and the development of novel goods and services (Kretschmer et al., 2022). The ecosystem's architecture comprises three principal constituents: platform owners, interdependent complementors and consumers (Azionya, 2022a; Hilbolling et al., 2021).

Platform owners establish governance frameworks that regulate participation and interactions. They implement measures to facilitate and promote value-creating mechanisms within these domains of varied content creation (Hein et al., 2020) through centralised systems of power, where platform owners exclusively define, establish and nurture governance processes. This centralised structure allows them to rapidly build and modify governance measures that foster ecosystem growth (Hein et al., 2020). Examples include Amazon, Facebook (Meta), Apple iOS, Google Android and Microsoft.

This centrality positions them at the core of their networks, enabling control over ecosystems and regulation of value flow. This often leads to reduced competition due to the concentration of economic power in the hands of platform owners (Gawer, 2022). This governance-centric approach to ecosystem management raises critical questions about power concentration and democratic participation, particularly as platform owners increasingly shape both market dynamics and societal interactions through their control of these digital infrastructures.

Choice and decision making

Since value exchange is a key fundamental of choice, digital superintermediaries endeavour to provide services efficiently to consumers and users. They offer services such as real-time chat, recommendations, ratings, evaluations, payments and e-commerce (Quarta, 2020), which help them, and their customers, to make important market decisions. Choice and decision making on digital MSPs depend on interoperability. Interoperability reduces clusters of people on a single platform and allows users to migrate from one platform to another in real time (Belleflamme, 2020). The choices and wants of brands and consumers are enhanced when products are easily accessible on more than one digital MSP. Therefore, lack of interoperability results in users' inability to multihome, thereby curtailing users' choices and wants (Azionya, 2022b).

Contrastingly, mandatory interoperability (Fei, 2023) can be a barrier to entry for smaller competitors, thereby limiting consumer choices. While interoperability appears to promote consumer choice and market efficiency, this perspective overlooks significant drawbacks such as reduced innovation incentives that diminish platform differentiation and unique value propositions.

Decision making can also be affected adversely. Algorithms can be useful for real-time data to increase end-customer knowledge, forecast their purchase intent and aid decision making. However, this can result in an algorithmic bubble that leads to fewer choices for consumers and users. According to Lundqvist (2019), this phenomenon stems from consumers progressively delegating their purchasing decisions to digital intermediaries. Lundqvist (2019) further contends that by surrendering their personal and non-personal data to intermediaries, consumers effectively relinquish their responsibility to remain informed, allowing these platforms to streamline or make decisions on their behalf. This raises the question of whether consumers have the illusion of choice and whether they are truly empowered.

Power and information asymmetries

Power and information asymmetries refer to the notion that there is always a power imbalance that is perpetually skewed in favour of certain actors and players. Information is considered unequally distributed and will always benefit certain actors and players more than others (Arko, 2019). Information asymmetries often lead to a lack of trust and increased uncertainty in social relations.

Overton-de Klerk and Azionya (2020) demonstrate how digital superintermediaries employ algorithmic and AI-driven behavioural modelling to shape and prime users' perceptual bubbles through targeted content, which effectively predicts and influences their responses to digital information. This then becomes a self-reinforcing cycle that could lead to polarising effects in broader society as users are seldom exposed to new or varying perspectives.

In addition, digital superintermediaries have the power of censorship through the suppression or regulation of content and opinions on their platforms, giving them the ability to manipulate and remotely control stakeholders, shape societal perceptions and culture by banning, shadow banning and de-platforming users and their content or offering. These capabilities are traditionally associated with institutions, organisations and governments with a degree of centralised control.

Therefore, one could ponder whether the old power imbalances still exist or have merely been rebuilt and mutated into a form that customers are unaware of. Has the disintermediation of media created the false impression that digital consumers have been empowered, giving them the appearance of control and agency? As power asymmetries shape digital interactions, the data economy and the quest for data sovereignty become pivotal in redefining control and value.

The data economy, sovereignty and surveillance

The emergence of the data economy has fundamentally transformed how value is created and captured in the digital age. Data has become a crucial economic resource that has enabled profit generation through various channels, including cloud services, e-commerce platforms and targeted advertising (UNCTAD, 2020). This economy's viability depends on the efficient extraction and refinement of data into digital intelligence that can be monetised through commercial applications. At the centre of this economic transformation are digital superintermediaries whose technological capabilities enable them to rapidly convert digital data into economic value. Their dominance in data intermediary services raises significant concerns about data sovereignty, particularly for African nations. These superintermediaries, predominantly US-based, exercise considerable control over the collection, analysis, storage and use of valuable data that spans multiple domains – from user behaviour and health to socio-political issues and law enforcement.

The centralised nature of data storage and governance by these superintermediaries creates a power dynamic that extends beyond mere economic advantages. Their position as corporate gatekeepers allows them to determine participation in value creation processes, potentially enabling discriminatory practices and compromising data privacy (Doerr et al., 2023). This control mechanism has evolved into what scholars' term "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff et al., 2019), where personal data is systematically harvested and monetised, often without explicit user consent.

The surveillance capabilities of these platforms have been significantly enhanced by current AI, particularly facial recognition systems that use artificial neural networks (Cîrneanu et al., 2023). Major platforms such as Meta, Google and X leverage their extensive user networks to facilitate this surveillance infrastructure. This system not only serves profit motives but unintentionally provides a platform for the spread of digital disinformation and misinformation while maintaining the ability to share encrypted information with governmental entities upon request (Marx, 2015). This synthesis reveals the complex interplay between economic power, technological capability and surveillance in the data economy. The concentration of control in the hands of digital superintermediaries raises crucial questions about data sovereignty, privacy rights and the democratic governance of digital resources in an increasingly data-driven world.

CHALLENGES POSED BY AI-POWERED DIGITAL SUPERINTERMEDIARIES

Energy and resources for running GPTs

The high costs and immense energy consumption associated with developing and training AI models have historically been barriers to entry and have limited meaningful competition. This has led to a market where only a few well-capitalised entities can afford to participate, fostering natural monopolies. In such an environment, tech giants act as digital superintermediaries, consolidating their power and influence (Azionya, 2022a; Kerber & Schweitzer, 2017). While the AI landscape is currently dominated by giants such as OpenAI, the emergence of innovative startups like Chinese tech company DeepSeek offers a promising counterbalance. Despite the narrative that DeepSeek's model trains at 3% of the cost of OpenAI, Kajal (2025) counters this assertion by stating that the actual training cost is $1.3 billion and not $6 million. Kajal (2025) further clarifies that DeepSeek's Multi-Head Latent Attention innovation reduces inference costs by 94%. The hope is that reductions to the financial and environmental burden of AI development will lower the barriers to entry, making it feasible for more startups and smaller companies to compete. This could pave the way for a more diverse and competitive AI ecosystem, where innovation is driven by a broader range of players rather than being concentrated in the hands of a few – breaking the hegemony of big AI incumbents and fostering a more dynamic and competitive market. This underscores the importance of supporting and investing in innovative startups that prioritise sustainability and cost efficiency, as they hold the key to a more equitable AI future. However, incumbents could adapt their models to run with the same efficiencies and effectively limit competition.

AI ethics and algorithmic bias

As AI is gradually falling into the hands of dominant digital superintermediaries, other challenges include how to handle issues related to algorithmic bias, transparency, ethics and data access. How can it be ensured that AI or GPTs will not be manipulated to discriminate against anyone based on ethnicity, race or colour? How do society, regulators and big tech ensure that AI or GPTs do not hallucinate? For refusing to produce photos of White people, Google Gemini 1.5 image generation was accused of racial bigotry against White people (Umbrello, 2024). The concentration of both computational and market power in these entities creates a concerning feedback loop – their dominant market position provides access to more data, which in turn strengthens their AI capabilities, further cementing their market control (Franck & Peitz, 2023). This self-reinforcing cycle raises fundamental questions about the sustainability of market competition in the AI era.

DISCUSSION

This conceptual framework focuses not on the existential threats posed by AI but rather on the implications of AI industry domination by a small group of actors who have already established dominance in the platform economy. While the efficiency gains from AI-powered digital superintermediaries are clear, the societal implications of concentrating such fundamental technological capabilities in so few hands demand greater scrutiny. The current trajectory suggests a future where these entities may become too integral to the functioning of the digital economy to effectively regulate. Moreover, the increasing integration of AI capabilities into core platform services raises profound questions about democratic oversight and market accountability. The tension between innovation and consolidation creates a complex regulatory challenge – how to preserve the benefits of scale and network effects while preventing the entrenchment of digital monopolies. This paradox is particularly acute given the self-reinforcing nature of AI development, where access to data and computational resources creates cumulative advantages that may be impossible to overcome through market forces alone. As an increasing volume of exchanges, searches, transactions and data generation occurs online and accumulates within digital superintermediaries' systems, power becomes increasingly concentrated in their hands. Digital superintermediaries function both vertically and horizontally to manage the complete hardware and software infrastructure required to provide Internet users with content and services (Smyrnaios, 2016).

Given that these digital superintermediaries have access to the largest datasets, the most substantial computing power, the most accomplished teams of AI researchers and considerable financial reserves for acquisitions, it is probable that AI will strengthen their market position (Kenney & Zysman, 2020). The implications suggest that, with generative AI-enabled software, digital superintermediaries will dominate the market as they are already dictating the pace of the AI revolution. As this revolution continues, it will likely reduce competition and innovation, resulting in winner-take-all scenarios while creating path dependence that discourages customers from switching between platforms.

CONCLUSION

The conceptual framework presented in this article presents the dynamics, dangers and dilemmas created by the development of generative AI technologies. Dynamism is reflected in how these technologies significantly reinforce the existing market power of digital superintermediaries through self-reinforcing cycles of data accumulation, infrastructure control and AI capability enhancement that consequently create unprecedented barriers to market entry and competition. Secondly, the dilemmas are illustrated by recent developments in generative AI technologies' minimal challenge to the existing market power of digital superintermediaries as high infrastructure costs, data requirements and established platform ecosystems make it extremely difficult for new entrants to compete effectively, despite technological innovations. However, this trajectory is not predetermined. While evidence suggests the dangers of market consolidation, alternative paths exist. Innovations regarding efficient AI training could lower entry barriers, regulatory interventions around data access might reshape competition, and the rise of open-source AI models such as DeepSeek could challenge centralised AI development. This framework provides a structured approach to understanding these evolving dynamics while acknowledging that uncertainties around regulatory effectiveness and technological disruption are speculative. The conceptual model offers insights into how AI capabilities interact with platform economics, establishing the groundwork for analysing future developments in this rapidly evolving landscape.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To counter this, regulatory agencies must examine existing antitrust and tax policies and identify methods to strengthen them to effectively govern the powers and influence of digital superintermediaries. These organisations must be subject to regulations that advance interoperability, encourage competition by lowering entry barriers and promote public interest through structural remedies (Montero & Finger, 2021). The European Union (EU) has taken the lead in enacting regulations that govern AI. They have already implemented stringent rules for digital superintermediaries designated as gatekeepers of the digital economy. The Digital Markets Act (DMA) of the EU mandates that designated gatekeepers of the digital economy must allow consumers to choose which applications to pre-install on their devices and they must make their messaging applications compatible with competitors' products. In addition, they cannot prohibit consumers from uninstalling pre-installed software or applications or favour their own services over those of competitors (European Commission, 2023). While the decision taken by the EU represents a significant step in the right direction, this research suggests that these crucial players in the digital economy should not be subjected to excessive regulation. Evidence demonstrates that imposing excessive regulations on economic actors impedes economic growth (Braunerhjelm & Eklund, 2014; Vannoni & Morelli, 2021). This article supports a regulatory structure that protects consumers, rewards investors and encourages businesses to innovate and create value, as an economy can only flourish with appropriate regulation.

REFERENCES

Adner, R. (2017). Ecosystem as structure: An actionable construct for strategy. *Journal of Management*, 43(1):39–58.

African Union. (2020). *The digital transformation strategy for Africa 2020–2030*. Available from: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38507-doc-dts-english.pdf

Al-Amin, M., Ali, M. S., Salam, A., Khan, A., Ali, A., Ullah, A., Alam, M. N. & Chowdhury, S. K. (2024). History of generative artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots: Past, present, and future development. *arXiv*.

Alexiadis, P., & de Streel, A. (2020). Designing an EU intervention standard for digital platforms. Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Florence School of Regulation. RSCAS 2020/14.

Andreessen, M. (2011). *Why software is eating the world*. The Wall Street Journal, August 20. Available from: https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424053111903480904576512250915629460

Anthropic. (2024). *Claude 3.5 Sonnet*, June 21. Available from: https://www.anthropic.com/news/claude-3-5-sonnet

Ardolino, M., Saccani, N., Adrodegari, F. & Perona, M. (2020). A business model framework to characterise digital multisided platforms. *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, 6(1):10.

Arko, B. (2019). Understanding power asymmetry in participatory development spaces: Insights from Ghana's Decent Work Programme. *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 6(1):399–404.

Azionya, C. (2022)a. Value creation in the 4IR: Millennials and digital multisided platforms (MSPs). *Digital Policy Studies*, 1(2):1–17.

Azionya, C.M. (2022)b. *The value creation of South African millennial interactions on digital multisided platforms in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (PhD Thesis)*. Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg. Available from: https://hdl.handle.net/10210/503191

Belleflamme, P. (2020). *An introduction to the economics of platform competition – Part 2. IpdigIT*, April 14. Available from: http://www.ipdigit.eu/2020/04/an-introduction-to-the-economics-of-platform-competition-part-2/

Belleflamme, P. & Peitz, M. (2021). *The economics of platforms: Concepts and strategy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Braunerhjelm, P. & Eklund, J.E. (2014). Taxes, tax administrative burdens, and new firm formation. *Kyklos*, 67(1):1–11.

Büchel, J. & Rusche, C. (2020). Competition in the digital economy: An analysis of gatekeepers and regulations. *IW-Policy Paper No. 26/2020*. Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft (IW).

Cîrneanu, A.-L., Popescu, D. & Iordache, D. (2023). New trends in emotion recognition using image analysis by neural networks, a systematic review. *Sensors*, 23(16):7092. Available from: https://doi.org/10.3390/s23167092

Climent, R.C. & Haftor, D.M. (2021). Value creation through the evolution of business model themes. *Journal of Business Research*, 122:353–361.

Climent, R.C., Haftor, D.M. & Staniewski, M.W. (2024). AI-enabled business models for competitive advantage. *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge*, 9(3):100532.

Colangelo, G. (2022). Antitrust unchained: The EU's case against self-preferencing. *ICLE White Paper*. SSRN. Available from: https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4227839

Cropley, A. (2024). *The evolution of AI in strategic communication: Exploring the opportunity*. Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence. Available from: https://thecsce.com/resources/the-evolution-of-ai-in-strategic-communication-exploring-the-opportunity/

Dehouche, N. (2021). Plagiarism in the age of massive generative pre-trained transformers (GPT-3). *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics*, 21:17–23. Available from: https://doi.org/10.3354/esep00195

Doerr, S., Frost, J., Gambacorta, L. & Shreeti, V. (2023). *Big techs in finance. BIS Working Papers, No WP1129*. Bank for International Settlements. Available from: https://www.bis.org/publ/work1129.pdf

European Commission. (2023). Digital Markets Act: The Commission designates six gatekeepers. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_4328

Fei, L. (2023). Regulation under administrative guidance: The case of China's forcing interoperability on digital platforms. *Computer Law & Security Review*, 48(1):105786. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clsr.2023.105786

Franck, J.U. & Peitz, M. (2023). Market power of digital platforms. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 39(1):34–46. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/grac045

Gawer, A. (2022). Digital platforms and ecosystems: Remarks on the dominant organisational forms of the digital age. *Innovation*, 24(1):110–124. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/14479338.2022.2036987

Ghodsi, A. (2023), September 1). I run a $38 billion software company. In 10 years, CEOs who don't understand data and AI won't be eligible for the top job in any industry. *Business Insider*, September 1. Available from https://www.businessinsider.com/databricks-ali-ghodsi-unqualified-ceos-dont-know-ai-data-2023-8

Gilani, T.T. (2025). AI performance optimisation with the latest GPU Servers. *Seimaxim*, February 17. Available from https://www.seimaxim.com/ai/ai-performance-optimization-with-the-latest-gpu-servers

Gregory, R. W., Henfridsson, O., Kaganer, E. & Kyriakou, H. (2021). The role of artificial intelligence and data network effects in creating user value. *Academy of Management Review*, 46(3):534–551.

Gu, H. (2023). Data, Big Tech, and the new concept of sovereignty. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-023-09855-1

Harvard Online. (2023). The benefits and limitations of generative AI: Harvard experts answer your questions. Available from: https://www.harvardonline.harvard.edu/blog/benefits-limitations-generative-ai

Hein, A., Schreieck, M., Riasanow, T., Setzke, D. S., Wiesche, M., Böhm, M., & Krcmar, H. (2020). Digital platform ecosystems. *Electronic Markets*, 30(1):87–98. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12525-019-00377-4

Hernández, A. & Amigó, J.M. (2021). Attention mechanisms and their applications to complex systems. *Entropy*, 23(3):283. Available from: https://doi.org/10.3390/e23030283

Hilbolling, S., Berends, H., Deken, F. & Tuertscher, P. (2021). Sustaining complement quality for digital product platforms: A case study of the Philips Hue ecosystem. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 38(1):21–48. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/jpim.12551

Hodgson, L. (2024). VCs go vertical in backing specialised AI. *PitchBook*. Available from https://pitchbook.com/news/articles/vertical-ai-vc

Huberty, M. (2015). Awaiting the second big data revolution: From digital noise to value creation. *Journal of Industry, Competition and Trade*, 15(1):35–47. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10842-015-0186-x

Hutchinson, C.S. & Treščáková, D. (2022). Tackling gatekeepers' self-preferencing practices. *European Competition Journal*, 18(3):567–590.

Jaakkola, E. (2020). Designing conceptual articles: Four approaches. *AMS Review*, 10:18–26.

Kajal, K. (2025). Research exposes DeepSeek's AI training cost is not $6M, it's a staggering $1.3B. *Interesting Engineering*, January 31. Available from: https://interestingengineering.com/culture/deepseeks-ai-training-cost-billion

Kalla, D., Smith, N., Samaah, F. & Kuraku, S. (2023). Study and analysis of chat GPT and its impact on different fields of study. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 8(3).

Kamnis, S. (2023). Generative pre-trained transformers (GPT) for surface engineering. *Surface and Coatings Technology*, 202:129680. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.surfcoat.2023.129680

Kenney, M., & Zysman, J. (2020). The platform economy: Restructuring the space of capitalist accumulation. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 13(1):55–76. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsaa001

Kerber, W., & Schweitzer, H. (2017). Special issue on contracts on digital goods and services: Interoperability in the digital economy. In A. Metzger, H. Schweitzer, R. Janal, & S. Golla (eds). *International Journal of Property Information Technology and Electronic Communication*, 8(1):39–58. Available from: https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2922515

Khurana, D., Koli, A., Khatter, K. & Singh, S. (2023). Natural language processing: State of the art, current trends and challenges. *Multimedia Tools and Applications*, 82(3):3713–3744. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11042-022-13428-4

Kolade, O., Owoseni, A., & Egbetokun, A. (2023). *Frenemy of progress? Investigation of the disruptive impacts of generative pre-trained transformers (GPT) on learning and assessment in higher education*. Paper presented at the British Academy of Management Annual Conference 2023, September. University of Sussex, Brighton, UK.

Kolt, N. (2024). *Governing AI agents*. Available from: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4772956

Kretschmer, T., Leiponen, A., Schilling, M. & Vasudeva, G. (2022). Platform ecosystems as meta-organisations: Implications for platform strategies. *Strategic Management Journal*, 43(3):405–424. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.3257

Lianos, I. & Carballa-Smichowski, B. (2022). A coat of many colours – new concepts and metrics of economic power in competition law and economics. *Journal of Competition Law & Economics*, 18(4):795–831. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1093/joclec/nhac002

Lundqvist, B. (2019). Regulating competition in the digital economy. In *Competition Law for the Digital Economy*. Massachusetts: Edward elgar Publishing, 1–30.

Market Insider. (2024). Apple 'over two years' behind leaders in generative AI, Bloomberg reports. *Business Insider*, October 21. Available from: https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/apple-over-two-years-behind-leaders-in-generative-ai-bloomberg-reports-1033864317

Marx, G.T. (2015). Surveillance studies. In *International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*. 2nd ed. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 733–741. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.64025-4

Mayer-Schönberger, V., & Cukier, K. (2013). *Big data: A revolution that will transform how we live, work, and think*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Meta Llama 3. (2024). Introducing Meta Llama 3: The most capable openly available LLM to date. *Meta*, April 18. Available from https://ai.meta.com/blog/meta-llama-3/

Montero, J. & Finger, M. (2021). Regulating digital platforms as the new network industries. *Competition and Regulation in Network Industries*, 22(2):111–126. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/17835917211011567

Moore, S. & Hübscher, R. (2021). *Strategic communication and AI: Public relations with intelligent user interfaces*. 1st ed. Routledge. Available from: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003111320

Nelson, G.S. (2019). Bias in artificial intelligence. *North Carolina Medical Journal*, 80(4):220–222. Available from: https://doi.org/10.18043/ncm.80.4.220

OECD Interim Report. (2018). Digitalisation, business models and value creation. In Tax challenges arising from digitalisation – interim report 2018: Inclusive framework on BEPS.

Overton-de Klerk, N. (2023). Reflections on the current state and future of strategic communication as paradigm and practice. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Sciences in Southern Africa*, 42(1):4–21.

Overton-de Klerk, N. & Azionya, C.M. (2020). The world is drowning in COVID-19 communication but isn't much smarter for it. *Daily Maverick*. October 12. Available from: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-10-12-the-world-is-drowning-in-covid-19-communication-but-isnt-much-smarter-for-it/

Padilla, J., Perkins, J. & Piccolo, S. (2022). Self-preferencing in markets with vertically integrated gatekeeper platforms. *The Journal of Industrial Economics*, 70(2):371–395. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/joie.12287

Pichal, S. (2024). Introducing Gemini 2.0: Our new AI model for the agentic era. *Google blog*. Available from: https://blog.google/technology/google-deepmind/google-gemini-ai-update-december-2024/#ceo-message

Quarta, A. (2020). Narratives of the digital economy: How platforms are challenging consumer law and hierarchical organisation. *Global Jurist*, 20(2). Available from: https://doi.org/10.1515/gj-2020-0026

Robinson, B & Bhatia, R. (2025). Driving Growth: The impact of digital transformation on African economies. *Wilson Centre*, January 16. Available from: https://gbv.wilsoncenter.org/article/driving-growth-impact-digital-transformation-african-economies

Roisenzvit, A.B. (2023). From Euclidean distance to spatial classification: Unraveling the technology behind GPT models. *Universidad del CEMA*.

Sarker, I.H. (2021). Machine learning: Algorithms, real-world applications and research directions. *SN Computer Science*, 2:160. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1007/s42979-021-00592-x

Shumailov, I., Shumaylov, Z., Zhao, Y., Gal, Y., Papernot, N. & Anderson, R. (2023). The curse of recursion: Training on generated data makes models forget. *arXiv preprint arxiv:2305.17493*. Available from: https://arxiv.org/abs/2305.17493

Smyrnaios, N. (2016). The GAFAM effect: Strategies and logics of the internet oligopoly. *Communication Languages*, 188(2):61–83. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2016.1182345

Statista. (2024). Artificial intelligence – *Worldwide*. Available from: https://www.statista.com/outlook/tmo/artificial-intelligence/worldwide

Taherdoost, H. & Madanchian, M. (2023). Artificial intelligence and sentiment analysis: A review in competitive research. *Computers*, 12(2):37. Available from: https://doi.org/10.3390/computers12020037

Tang, F. & Qian, Z. (2020). Leveraging interdependencies among platforms and complementors in the innovation ecosystem. *PLOS ONE*, 15(10):e0239972. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0239972

Turner, C. (2015). Re: What is the difference between word type and token? *ResearchGate*. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/post/What_is_the_difference_between_Word_Type_and_Token/5640fb975dbbbd13038b4586/citation/download

Umbrello, S. (2024). Beyond computation: The human spirit in the age of AI. *Word on Fire*. Available from: https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/beyond-computation-the-human-spirit-in-the-age-of-ai/

UNCTAD. (2020). Digital platforms and value creation in developing countries: Implications for national and international policies. *Trade and Development Board Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-commerce and* *the Digital Economy, Fourth session Geneva, April 29–May 1, 2020. Item 3 of the provisional agenda.*

Vannoni, M. & Morelli, M. (2021). Regulation and economic growth: A 'contingent' relationship. Available from: https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/regulation-and-economic-growth-contingent-relationship

Webster, J. & Watson, R.T. (2002). Analysing the past to prepare for the future: Writing a literature review. *MIS Quarterly*, 26(2):xiii–xxiii.

Wilson, H.J. & Daugherty, P.R. (2018). Collaborative intelligence: Humans and AI are joining forces. *Harvard Business Review*, 96(4):114–123.

World Bank Group. (2024). Digital transformation drives development in Africa. *World Bank Group Results Briefs*. Available from: https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2024/01/18/digital-transformation-drives-development-in-afe-afw-africa

WTO. (2023). *Ad valorem*. Available from: https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/glossary_e/glossary_e.htm

Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Nothhaft, H. & Werder, K. P. (2018). Strategic communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4):487–505. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485

Zuboff, S., Möllers, N., Wood, D. M. & Lyon, D. (2019). Surveillance capitalism: An interview with Shoshana Zuboff. *Surveillance & Society*, 17(1/2):257–266. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v17i1/2.13101

Using a Delphi Method in the Future of PR and Communication Global Study: South African Findings on Social Impact and PR Education

AUTHOR(S)

Dalien Rene Benecke
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3208-0669

Corne Meintjes
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3391-4565

Padhma Moodley
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2635-8177

Lida Holtzhausen
North West University, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1275-6684

Anette Degenaar
North West University, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2767-5986

Neil Levy
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5507-0300

PUBLISHED ONLINE
Volume 44 (1) May 2025
Pages 107-123
Submitted February 2024
Accepted March 2025

DOI
10.36615/wfx19633

ISSN
Online 2957-7950
Print 0259-0069

Abstract

Public relations in Africa and South Africa has evolved in accordance with its changing landscape. The South African public relations practitioner still operates as a technician, manager and strategist, with a steady increase in the performance of strategic decision-making roles in organisations. The purpose of this article is to present the views of South African public relations educators and practitioners who participated in a global study titled "The Future of PR and Communication and Their Social Impact". Current views expressed by these public relations experts include perspectives on their roles, social impact and value, and their influence on public relations education. Earlier studies on the roles of public relations in South Africa highlighted its strategic role with reports that South African public relations practitioners indicated an increase in strategic influence but with limited understanding and use of measurement applications and social impact analysis, which are key components in showcasing the influence of public relations in society. It is therefore essential to revisit the perceptions of public relations practitioners and educators of their roles and the social impact on society, together with its influence on public relations education.

The global study "The Future of PR and Communication and Their Social Impact" applied a Delphi-method approach, which included various rounds of concept testing and meaning-making. This method is ideal for obtaining the views of public relations experts and reaching consensus within a specific geographical context such as South Africa. The study offered a unique approach to public relations research in South Africa, both in research methodology and opportunity to participate in a global study in 23 countries with over 600 participants. As is customary in a Delphi study, the researchers asked participants to match a series of characteristics with a specific label and practice noun describing public relations roles and social impact. This approach enabled comparisons of both assumptions and focus areas of regional (South African) public relations educators and practitioners. Significant findings obtained from these participants are aligned with international views and included an emphasis on the integration of communication activities with organisational business objectives as well as practical, real-life experiences included in public relations education. Participants agreed that social impact could be achieved through stakeholder engagement, agenda setting, creating awareness and influencing the corporate social responsibility focus of organisations. Participants viewed social value as the outcome of social impact activities.

Keywords

Delphi methodology, measurement and evaluation, public relations education, public relations roles, social impact, social value, strategic role

INTRODUCTION

The role of public relations practitioners and the strategic function public relations fulfils in organisations have been the focus of many studies, with regular reviews of how theory and practice have evolved and what the future focus in education should be. The role of public relations assumes a strategic dimension in today's rapidly evolving economy and the effects of public relations globally have a direct effect on its practice in South Africa. Public relations as a strategic function, aimed at influencing the organisational objectives with a role in decision making, managing stakeholders and measuring results of communication strategies, has gained prominence during the past decade (Gregory, 2004). "The effectiveness of the PR [public relations] practitioner in achieving overall business success is analysed in the measurement and evaluation conducted as part of the strategic planning process. Measurement and evaluation, therefore, need to embrace whole organisation performance" (Gregory, 2023:105). This approach to measurement includes the review of stakeholder and societal objectives to determine whether they have been met. Notably, all public relations functions should be integrated to deliver maximum message and communication impact to their respective stakeholders (Verwey, 2015).

According to Prof. Anne Gregory, public relations has evolved as a comprehensive practice that extends beyond elevating an organisation's image and reputation, with greater emphasis placed on the strategic function of public relations in organisations and society (CPRE, 2023). Furthermore, a critical review of the importance of a context-specific approach to public relations was highlighted. The "Future of PR and Communication and Their Social Impact" global study (Global Future study) did not aim to find one common definition for public relations but rather challenged participants to identify the different functions. This resulted in identifying public relations as "an empowering vehicle that has the ability to embrace change and become the driving force of ethical debate involving both organizations and their stakeholders" (Adi & Stoeckle, 2023:67).

Furthermore, as public relations evolves, clearer ways of addressing the disconnect between theory and practice are being sought to enhance the synergy between academic theory and practical application. Public relations educators and practitioners seem to have a long-standing challenge in integrating theory and practice (CPRE, 2023). Globally, the relevance of public relations curricula and their effectiveness in preparing students and young practitioners for their careers as public relations practitioners have been high on the agenda. Academic programme leaders, or lecturers and practitioners, are often involved in updating curricula to address this need; however, there also exists a lack of understanding among these public relations experts as to the changing and volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environments they operate in. A public relations lecturer may not be experienced in industry practices as they operate within an academic context, while a public relations industry member may not be familiar with the most recent studies on public relations as they focus mostly on developing strategies within specific contexts for specific clients. This tendency is observable in the current experiences of both the public relations industry and academia on the application of artificial intelligence (AI), especially generative AI (gen AI), in public relations.

The Global Future study, with its focus on social value and social impact, aimed to explore cultural diversity and differences in a multilingual and iterative reflective-qualitative approach. This Delphi study commenced in 2022 and investigated two distinct time perspectives: a) the present situation, focusing on facts as they are; and b) future development, adopting a normative approach that envisioned how things should be or may become (Adi & Stoeckle, 2023). The study started with a sample of 613 educators, academics and practitioners from 23 countries around the globe. All four rounds were completed by 313 respondents from 23 countries. To ensure clarity and incentivise responses, three languages were used: English, Spanish and Turkish. The first objective aimed to address critical questions related to the professionalisation of public relations, acknowledging that a profession's societal impact and social value are integral aspects of its role in society. The second objective was to formulate a set of actionable proposals concerning teaching and training in public relations and communication. As the landscape of public relations evolves, it becomes imperative to equip practitioners with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate the complexities of their roles effectively. The aim was to contribute insights to shape educational approaches for relevance and responsiveness to the dynamic needs of the public relations and communication industry.

Public relations in Africa and South Africa has evolved in accordance with its changing landscape (El Rafie, 2024). The purpose of this article is to present findings on the perceptions of South African public relations practitioners and educators who participated in the global study with specific reference to the roles of public relations practitioners, social impact and social value, and aligning public relations education to address these developments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In addressing the question of what the future of public relations holds for public relations practitioners, the Global Future study focused on the roles and practices of public relations practitioners, especially related to stakeholders and their influence on organisations, the social impact and value of public relations activities, and how these factors could influence public relations education. These objectives sought to provide meaningful insights to help shape educational approaches that remain relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of the public relations and communication industry.

Roles and practices of public relations practitioners

Wehmeier (2009) found that public relations theory and practice have taken on a management approach, with Dühring (2015:13) commenting on the "compartmentalization of PR into different schools of thought, namely, public relations, strategic communication and corporate communication". These developments demonstrate the relationship public relations has with the environment in which it practises. Increasing technological complexity and globalisation (Verwey, 2015), the influence of COVID-19 (Benecke et al, 2021) and the increasing significance of stakeholder engagement in both for-profit and non-profit organisations (Meyer & Barker, 2020) have altered the perception and practice of communication in general and the practice of public relations in particular. These changes require public relations scholars and practitioners to rethink their perspectives and understand the implications for their roles and purpose in organisations as well as broader society.

Debates about the role and purpose of public relations have been revived in several recent studies (Meyer, 2017; Pieczka, 2019; Suárez-Monsalve, 2022). In addition, in the 21st century, the study of public relations shows the tension between the social functions inherent in communication and the productivity demands of business (Suárez-Monsalve, 2022). The conceptual preferences of what public relations is and how it should be interpreted by understanding its constructs as well as its place in society are deemed important (Adi & Stoeckle, 2021; Pieczka, 2019). In this sense, the conceptualisation of the social impact and social value of public relations needs to be defined, and an understanding of measurement and evaluation should be formulated in accordance with traditional organisational and marketing objectives (Campaign Collective, 2018a and 2018b). Fawkes (2018) conducted a global study known as the Global Capability Framework (GCF), asking what the public relations profession and its practitioners were capable of. The latter encouraged a pilot study by Benecke et al. (2021) as the issues associated with the GCF coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the global industry and, more specifically, South Africa. The existing literature points to a lack of consensus and clarity regarding both the definition and purpose of public relations. This motivates South African public relations scholars to seek insights from the Global Future study and its influence on the profession in South Africa. As Adi (2022) points out, "only by thinking about the future, can we contribute to what we can do to address the challenges ahead".

Future changes and environmental factors also influence public relations research and theory building and practice in Africa. Several African scholars have highlighted the growth of public relations in various African countries and, aligned with other studies also referenced, the influence of digital platforms (Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005), the glocalisation of public relations practice, which refers to the use of global practices but adjusting them for local use (Callista, 2023), and the importance of reciprocal relationships (Molekao cited in Africa PR Report, 2023).

Social impact and social value

A long-standing debate in public relations has been the value its actions have for organisations and society. Gregory (2004) started asking the question more than 20 years ago, "What is the value of PR?". Determining the value of public relations goes beyond determining what public relations is, what it does and who does it, or even what the return on investment is on the plethora of public relations activities. The question is also of specific relevance in a country such as South Africa, where local and international organisations are continuously embarking on campaigns and projects in an attempt to address various social, economic and environmental issues in a diverse and highly unequal society. Organisations spend an estimated R11.8 billion on corporate social investment annually (Trialogue, 2023). "Companies become synonymous with the social impact they create" (Trialogue, 2023:26). However, determining the social impact of public relations activities goes hand in hand with determining the social value of public relations activities.

In motivating for the Global Future study, research leads Ana Adi and Thomas Stoeckle argued the need for research on the social impact and value of public relations in addition to its roles and education. South Africa has also seen a limited number of research studies on social impact and value derived from public relations activities. Landsberg Boshoff (2023) found that measurement and evaluation are still low on the agenda of public relations practitioners in South Africa, raising the question of how social impact has been measured and social value determined outside of the basic results found in integrated reports. Social impact refers to the measurable results of communication and public relations activities in communities and society. In the Global Future study, social impact is seen as the "measurable result of concrete, conscious, and deliberate activities to generate social benefit, which emerges as the product of socially valuable decisions of an organization" (Adi & Stoeckle, 2023). Measurements may include gathering statistics such as how many people attended a community event, how many people are involved in a community project, and how many books are available to young children. Social value is the value that a society (individuals and social structures) places on public relations activities, which should be based on how these activities fulfil their needs. Social value speaks to the needs of those a strategy is intended to influence and is more than the measurements done to determine the social impact. It may also take longer to gain information about the social value of a public relations activity because change takes time.

Very few answers or models have been developed to measure and determine the social impact and social value of public relations activities. Values are often defined in organisational rather than societal terms, with few models assessing the social impact of public relations. In this regard, outcome reporting remains essential to maintaining professionalism. Reporting on the results achieved from any strategy is essential to maintaining professionalism in all major disciplines.

Public relations and communication education

Public relations practitioners play a critical role in organisations and society and thus require the appropriate education and training to act as intermediaries and influencers (Benecke, 2019; Rensburg & Cant, 2009). Coombs and Holladay (2013) state that the need for public relations education and training is to equip public relations practitioners with the knowledge and skills to be effective communicators on various levels, capable of building relationships and navigating complex environments. Their understanding of media dynamics, strategic planning, adaptability to technological advancements and emphasis on ethical conduct are integral components that should be covered in public relations education and training programmes (Zerfass et al., 2016). Ultimately, mastering these multifaceted skills is paramount to successfully managing communication, relationships and reputations in today's intricate and fast-paced professional landscape (CPRE, 2023; Kent & Taylor 2002).

When faced with dilemmas, practitioners use various resources to navigate conflicting interests between their organisation and/or client and the stakeholders they serve. These resources encompass an individual's personal values and beliefs, ethical guidelines within the organisation and ethical codes of practice from professional associations (Hagelstein et al., 2021). Public relations and communication education and training develop these resources to address multiple challenges, with well-established and competitive qualifications offered by private and public universities in South Africa.

A South African study conducted in 2021 on the Global Alliance Capability Framework indicated that although public relations practitioners are well educated and have the relevant qualifications, they lack a strategic approach and mindset (Benecke et al, 2021). The ability to fulfil a strategic function within organisations involves more than good qualifications; it also requires an enabling environment and evidence of the impact of public relations in achieving organisational success. Public relations educators and scholars are responsible for addressing all developments in identified issues in internal and external contexts. To address this in a South African context, graduate programmes require a focused approach in preparing aspiring professionals for their future careers. The teaching of public relations and communication should involve practical, real-life examples built on a strong theoretical foundation. This approach is deemed more effective in imparting sound public relations and communication principles to students and professionals.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed the Delphi method, a systematic and iterative forecasting technique that leverages expert consensus to explore complex issues where empirical data may be limited or fragmented (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963; Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). The Delphi method is widely recognised for its application in fields requiring structured expert input, making it particularly suitable for examining the evolving role of public relations and communication in South Africa. Given the rapid shifts in the public relations landscape, including digital transformation, stakeholder engagement complexities and the integration of ethical considerations, this study sought to harness expert perspectives to develop a blended understanding of the sector's future direction.

Research design and approach

The Delphi technique was selected because it facilitates consensus building through multiple iterative rounds of data collection and analysis (Nasa et al., 2021). This method is particularly valuable in public relations research, where industry practitioners and academics provide diverse yet intersecting viewpoints (Adi & Stoeckle, 2023). The study adopted a modified Delphi approach, which allowed for integrating both qualitative and quantitative data across four rounds, ensuring methodological rigour and the progressive refinement of expert insights.

Sampling and expert panel selection

A purposive sampling approach was employed to identify expert panel members with significant experience in public relations practice, education and strategic communication. The sample was drawn from three primary categories: public relations practitioners, educators and academics. This diverse representation ensured that the study captured insights from those actively shaping the industry and those contributing to its theoretical development. In line with Delphi's best practices (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004), a panel of 24 South African experts was recruited to participate in each iterative round of data collection.

Experts were identified through professional networks, academic affiliations and recommendations from industry bodies. The selection criteria included the following:

- A minimum of five years of experience in public relations practice or education;
- Active engagement in industry research, policymaking or strategic consulting;
- Demonstrated expertise through publications, leadership roles or significant contributions to public relations practice.

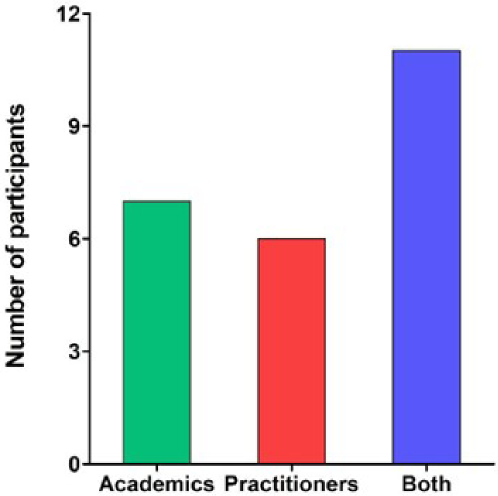

Figure 1: Distribution of South African participants

Figure 1 indicates that of the 24 participants who were included in the study, seven were from academia, six were practitioners and 11 were both.

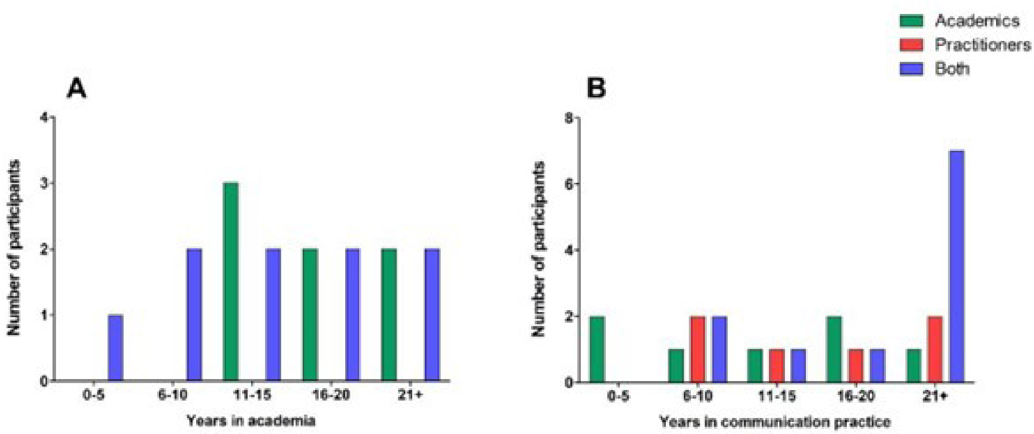

Figure 2: Distribution of South African participants by years in academia (Panel A) and communication practice (Panel B)

Figure 2 Panel A illustrates the distribution of participants based on their years in academia, categorised as academics, practitioners or those engaged in both roles, namely educators. The majority of participants with 11–15 years of experience were academics (n = 3). Participants engaged in both academia and practice (educators) were consistently represented across all experience levels, with a slight increase from 0–5 years (n = 1) to 6–10 years (n = 2) and then remaining constant at n = 2 for higher experience levels.

Figure 2 Panel B presents the distribution of participants based on their years in communication practice. Unlike academia, communication practice included contributions from academics, practitioners and individuals engaged in both roles across all experience levels. While individuals engaged in both roles were most prevalent in the 21+ years category (n = 7), practitioners were also well represented in the 6–10 years (n = 2) and 21+ years (n = 2) categories. Academics in communication practice followed a more even distribution, with representation across multiple experience levels but peaking at 16–20 years (n = 2).

Delphi rounds and data collection process

The study was structured into four iterative rounds. Responses were progressively refined through a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques:

Round 1: Qualitative exploration

The first round involved an open-ended questionnaire designed to gather broad expert opinions on the current and future state of public relations in South Africa. Questions focused on the strategic role of public relations, stakeholder engagement, ethical challenges and the impact of technological advancements. Responses were collected via the Welphi platform, a web-based tool tailored for Delphi studies, which ensured secure and anonymous participation (Adi & Stoeckle, 2023). Thematic analysis was applied to identify key themes that emerged from qualitative inputs (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Round 2: Refinement of themes

In the second round, panellists reviewed anonymised responses from Round 1 and were invited to refine their perspectives. This iterative process allowed for critical reflection and the identification of areas requiring further clarification. Participants could adjust their responses based on collective input, aligning with the Delphi method's objective of progressively enhancing consensus (De Bruin & Rosemann, 2007).

Round 3: Quantitative prioritisation

Based on the qualitative findings from the previous rounds, structured questions were developed using a five-point Likert scale. These questions aimed to quantify agreement levels regarding the key themes identified earlier. Aggregated rankings were used to determine the relative importance of identified factors. This ensured a robust prioritisation process (Nasa et al., 2021).

Round 4: Consensus and validation

The final round sought to validate findings by presenting refined statements and rankings derived from previous rounds. Consensus was defined as an agreement level of 75% or higher among participants, in line with established Delphi methodology (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). Areas of divergence were documented to provide insight into ongoing debates in the field of public relations.

Data analysis and interpretation

Qualitative data were analysed through thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and conceptual relationships (Lee, 2020). Open coding was applied to participants' responses, enabling the extraction of core themes related to public relations roles, ethical considerations and social impact. Quantitative data from Rounds 3 and 4 were analysed using descriptive statistics, with mean scores and standard deviations calculated to assess levels of consensus (Rubin, 2021).

A critical component of the Delphi approach is the iterative engagement of participants, ensuring that evolving insights inform each subsequent phase (Engels & Kennedy, 2007). This process minimises bias while maintaining the validity and reliability of findings, which reinforces the study's methodological robustness (Sablatzky, 2022).

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

Ensuring methodological rigour required adherence to credibility, dependability and confirmability principles (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Credibility was upheld through expert panel diversity and iterative feedback loops, while confirmability was enhanced through independent coding verification. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Johannesburg and North-West University, ensuring compliance with research ethics standards (Adi & Stoeckle, 2023). Participants provided informed consent, and data confidentiality was maintained through secure electronic data collection.

Methodological contribution

This study contributes to public relations and communication research by demonstrating the efficacy of the Delphi method in exploring industry-specific trends. Unlike traditional survey methodologies, the iterative nature of Delphi allows for expert-driven insights that evolve over multiple rounds, leading to more refined conclusions (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). The inclusion of South African public relations professionals adds contextual depth and highlights how global public relations trends intersect with local challenges and opportunities. In addition, the use of Welphi software facilitated real-time engagement and secure data management, showcasing the role of technology in enhancing qualitative research methodologies (Adi & Stoeckle, 2023).

By integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques, this study provides a replicable framework for future public relations research employing the Delphi methodology. The findings underscore the method's potential for strategic foresight in public relations education, practice and policymaking, offering a roadmap for future studies seeking to bridge the gap between theoretical and applied knowledge.

FINDINGS

The findings presented are on three key themes that support the research objectives, namely roles and practices of South African public relations practitioners, social value and social impact and, finally, public relations education for social impact and value.

Roles and practice of public relations in South Africa

During Rounds 1 and 2, several key observations emerged regarding the roles and purpose of public relations. Themes that overlapped from both rounds included the strategic importance of communication, stakeholder engagement and value creation. The lines were blurred between the different roles traditionally ascribed to public relations, corporate communication and marketing communication, with attention focused on the practice rather than on the designation or role. Considerable importance was attributed to integrating strategy into communication practices, with increasing recognition of its pivotal role in achieving strategic organisational goals.

> The practice of communication as it applies to organisations is described by different terms in South Africa: corporate communication, communication management, marketing communication, and public relations. Strategic communication is a recognised term but rarely applied to describe an organisational function. i.e., I am still to see a company having a section/department called strategic communication. Public relations is a term that is still used by the government but is hardly used among big corporates. Public relations is, however, used to describe specialised services offered by communication and advertising agencies. Having said that, there seems a growing recognition among managers that communication is important to achieving strategic goals. However, that does not mean that communication strategy is seen as a key component of an organisational strategy. (Academic)

There was a focus on understanding and listening to stakeholder perspectives and needs, with organisations urged to align with stakeholder expectations.

> In terms of non-profit organisations, I would like to think that the main purpose of communication practice is to engage with stakeholders to get them involved, advocacy and to see the needs of the beneficiaries that we are serving met. (Practitioner)

> Communication practice mostly focuses on what is important to the organisation with little emphasis on what its stakeholders regard as relevant and important at a specific point in time. (Educator)

> Even though many practitioners seem to understand that communication should benefit stakeholders, my observation and research indicate that especially government departments and smaller organisations, for reasons that should be investigated further, don't fully engage in finding out what stakeholder expectations are. Communication is used to present the organisational perspective or to present a particular image of the organisation. (Academic).

Simultaneously, organisations were urged to discern what is essential and relevant to be inclusive of diverse views, and not to merely pretend or whitewash stakeholder engagement.

> Honestly, it depends on the type of organisation one comes from. For instance, for practitioners in South Africa in a government context, the term stakeholder is important. The rhetoric creates an impression that the engagements are stakeholder orientated. However, when one examines some of the approaches used in consultations about issues that affect communities, the consultations come across as rubber-stamping exercises where some of the critical stakeholders are not consulted. This results in white elephants (from structures to programmes with limited impact), wasted resources and hostile relations between the government and certain stakeholders. (Academic)

Regarding the perceived value of public relations, it seeks to offer both tangible and intangible benefits to the organisation and stakeholders. Participants addressed both the value and challenges associated with public relations, indicating an acknowledgement of its crucial yet intricate role, thus linking the practice to the complexities experienced in a VUCA environment.

Other themes that emerged from Round 1 were the role of public relations practice in crisis management and ethical communication. A pivotal role was assigned to public relations in the context of crisis management, emphasising its importance in navigating and mitigating crises for organisations. This underscored the strategic significance of public relations during turbulent times. A significant theme emerged concerning ethics in communication, signifying a notable recognition of the paramount importance of ethical considerations in the field. This theme reflected a conscientious approach to communication practices, acknowledging the ethical dimensions inherent in the discipline. This finding aligns with the 2024 Public Relations and Communication Association (PRCA) and African Public Relations Association (APRA) report, which revealed a clear distinction between individual and national ethical perceptions. While the majority of respondents stated that neither their personal ethics nor their organisation's ethics had been compromised in the past 12 months, they also indicated that their country's overall ethical standards had deteriorated (PRCA, 2024). This suggests that public relations practitioners prioritise professional and ethical conduct in their own practice, whereas the ethical lapses of politicians and certain government officials contribute to the broader ethical decline at a national level.

In the second round, responses delved deeper into the challenges related to the implementation of communication practices, providing a more nuanced understanding of practical obstacles. Highlighted trends included challenges in implementation, persuasive communication, alignment of messages and role distinction.

Challenges in implementation was a prominent theme, highlighting issues such as a lack of budget, support and a short-term focus that impacts communication practitioners in their efforts.

> There is also some dichotomy between recognition of the importance of communication and communication practice. On the one hand, more organisations create communication positions at the top executive level; on the other hand, at the practice level, practitioners experience a lack of budget, lack of support for their initiatives, and a very instrumental and short-term approach to their task. (Academic)

These results indicate the prioritisation of communication and information dissemination as key responsibilities for public relations practitioners. A lack of resources and support, coupled with reactive and short-term actions, may contribute to the issue of strategic influence of public relations practice in South Africa. The need for alignment of messages was a prevalent theme, underscoring the importance of consistency in messaging, positioning and approach across various organisational functions.

> The communication function should support engagement with stakeholders by other functions in the company or organisation. The comms staff would not typically be responsible for engagement but more for planned messaging, positioning, persuasion and disseminating information, whereas other functions would interact directly with stakeholders and build relationships. The communication sent out by the comms function should be aligned with the engagement that other functions embark on with stakeholders (in terms of messaging, approach, company position, etc.). (Practitioner)

Participants highlighted the importance of role distinction, noting that different organisational functions have distinct roles in communication, ranging from crafting messages to direct stakeholder interactions.

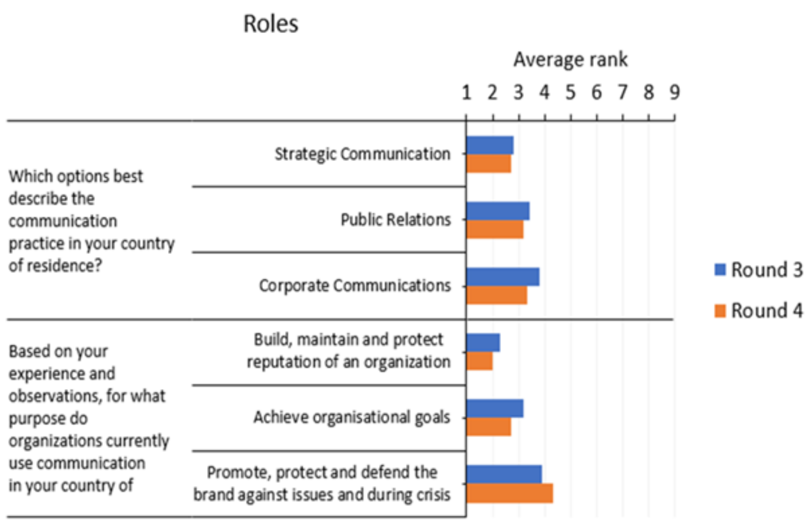

Figure 3: Roles and practice – quantitative

Note: The most appropriate choice was ranked first

As illustrated in Figure 3, the majority of participants described communication as strategic communication, followed by public relations and then corporate communication.

When asked about the current purpose of communication, the rankings primarily focused on building, maintaining and safeguarding the reputation of an organisation, followed by achieving organisational goals, and promoting, protecting and defending the brand against issues and during crises. The rankings remained consistent, although in Round 4, there was a lower average ranking.

Social value and impact

In answering the question "What is the value of PR?", the Global Future study aimed to explore the understanding public relations practitioners have of social impact and social value. Questions 14 to 17 focused on the definitions of social impact and social value: what the social value of PR is, the social impact of PR, what social value PR should provide to society and what social impact PR should provide to society. Question 20 asked how public relations should evaluate its social impact.

Definitions of social impact and social value

Participants commented during Rounds 1 and 2 that social impact refers to "the actions and interventions taken to change the status quo, [to make] real and meaningful progress". Social impact further involves "the isolation and measuring of direct cause-and-effect relationships between a specific set of activities and outcomes through established research methodologies". Social value, conversely, is more subjective and relates to the positive benefits communities assign to activities they are involved in. Social value is thus dependent on the stakeholder's interpretation and therefore differs from social impact, as the research methodologies applied by public relations professionals may yield statistics and results aligned to the original strategy but may be different when the feedback and views of community stakeholders are taken into consideration. Social impact may thus have negative and/or positive results, while social value can be seen as the result of social impact interventions.

Current South African views of social value

Building on the definitions identified above, South African respondents identified stakeholder engagement, mutual understanding, representation, the promotion of values, and operational impact as the key constructs of social value. Related to the promotion of values and operational impact resulting from good public relations messages, the following quote provides some insights:

> There are numerous social impacts as good PR/comms can help achieve desired behavioural changes that benefit the entire planet. For example, good PR/comms about climate change have made more people inclined to make environmentally sustainable choices when shopping or in their choice of transportation – this results in lower carbon emissions, which is better for global temperatures. (Educator)

South African participants view stakeholder engagement as essential, with both Rounds 1 and 2 emphasising the need for organisations to engage with and act in the best interest of their stakeholders, aiming to establish mutual understanding and represent the diverse nature of their stakeholders, including the voice of the "other".

> Public relations helps our complex, pluralistic society to reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions. It serves to bring private and public policies into harmony. (Academic)

Expectations of the role of social impact in bringing about change

A key function of public relations in fostering social impact is its agenda-setting power. Public relations professionals play a crucial role in raising awareness and informing stakeholders about pressing societal issues while bridging the gap between organisations and communities through corporate social investment initiatives. In addition, public relations is well-positioned to facilitate meaningful dialogue between businesses and society, contributing to long-term sustainability. Given the complexity of these relationships, authenticity is essential to reducing mistrust and promoting transparency.

> Social impact – it varies in terms of who says what to whom and with what effect. I feel the strategic communication industry works within a framework that limits the direction of society. The obsession with growth, for example, or the way promotional comms is driving consumer desires, or even voters' "hopes and fears". The impact of these could be negative, but in the end, PR is a profession funded by those who wish to communicate certain things to meet their objectives – hence we can only calculate the impact (positive or negative) of PR against the number of those that use the services and practices of strategic communication. (Practitioner)

Proposed measures for evaluation of the social impact of public relations in South Africa

Some of the most insightful contributions from the Global Future study are the responses on measurement practices that South African participants proposed to determine social impact. Responses ranged from reflective practices involving personal evaluation to aligning organisational goals with those of stakeholders and communities. Participants also acknowledged existing instruments such as the AMEC model, balanced scorecards, psychological AI profiling and measurable communication objectives to assist in determining social impact. The need to actively seek stakeholder feedback (including sentiment analysis) within a specific context and in a holistic manner was an important principle that was highlighted. There was a general call made to develop a conceptual framework to measure social impact relevant to public relations activities.

> Set clear objectives and measure impact in terms of the 3Ps: people (employees and all other stakeholders), planet (environmental impact and contribution) and profit (according to business objectives). (Educator)

> Do research. Get the feedback from stakeholders and talk to the people who are being directly affected by the said impact. (Academic)

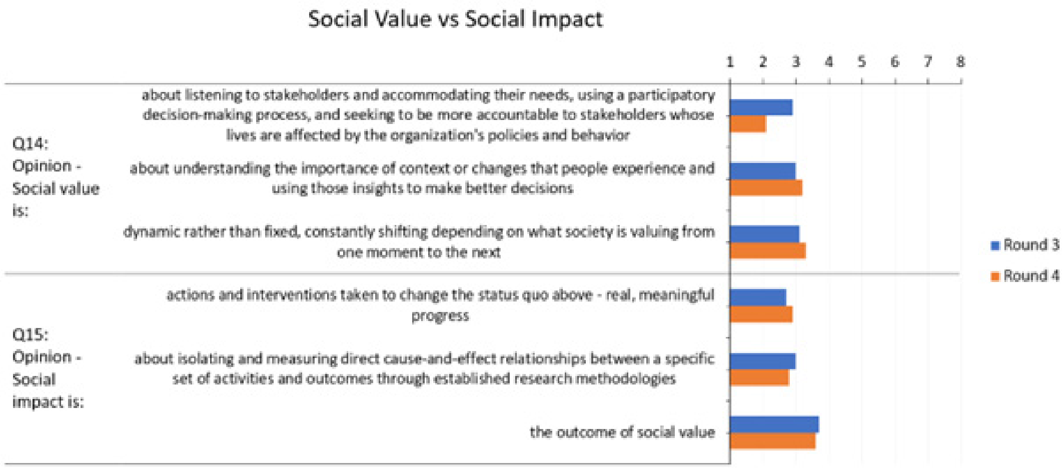

Figure 4: Responses on the meaning of social value and social impact

During Rounds 3 and 4, respondents presented their views on social value and social impact as similar in that they focused on the needs of the stakeholder, as opposed to the normative approach that regards the organisation as central to public relations activities. It is important to note that respondents acknowledged social impact as the direct "cause and effect" of public relations activities, while social value acknowledges the need to actively listen to stakeholders, identify the various changes they experienced and base decision making on these key insights.

Public relations education for social value and impact

The results categorised during the qualitative Rounds 1 and 2 focused on determining the optimal level and content of public relations and communication qualifications for maximising social impact and value. The primary findings emphasised the importance of incorporating both theory and practical elements in formal tertiary education and training. Round 2 specifically underscored the necessity for a well-rounded education programme, emphasising the significance of integrating theory with "intense practical experiences". Greater emphasis is placed on enhancing the social impact of public relations education through the effective integration of theory and practice.

In Rounds 1 and 2, both academics and practitioners indicated the importance of "practitioners understanding the value creation in all its tangible and intangible dimensions. All disciplines currently focus on value creation, and if public relations and communication can contribute to this debate in the organisation and in society, they could illustrate their value". This was reiterated in a statement that articulated the outcome of being "critical and open-minded thinkers". Understanding value creation would ensure that public relations practitioners understand not only their profession but also its contribution to society and the lives of multiple stakeholders. In the evolving landscape of public relations, a shift in focus from long-term communication strategies to the dynamic field of stakeholder relationship management is essential.

> The theory and principles are taught, but what I believe is missing is how to manage stakeholders, managers and clients well enough to achieve communications objectives. Being able to influence the expectations and direction of the leaders is essential for productive and value-driven comms. (Academic)

The contemporary reality of the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world demands that public relations practitioners navigate communication processes efficiently and abandon rigid annual communication plans. Emphasising the cultivation of relationships with both internal and external stakeholders becomes paramount, enabling practitioners to identify and address issues related to social impact and organisational value.

Formal training and hands-on experiential learning, which incorporates theory and practical experiences, as well as real-life projects with organisations are crucial elements for public relations students. This approach exposes upcoming practitioners to various business and social challenges where effective communication plays a pivotal role in finding solutions.

> My experience is that many (most) university lecturers in comms in my country don't have any (or much) experience of the corporate world. Academics in comms in my country have mostly only theoretical knowledge without practical experience and are therefore not able to expose students to the real issues in the discipline that they will have to deal with once their careers kick off. (Practitioner)

The potential negative influences of public relations are often linked to organisational management and culture (Sriramesh, 2007). Public relations and communication students need to be equipped with ethical values to withstand pressure from management and other functions (Zhang & Neill, 2023). Moreover, integrating modules on social value and impact into business qualifications, such as MBA curricula, is necessary (Barber & Venkatachalam, 2013). Chief executive officers (CEOs), future CEOs, and executives in MBA programmes need to be reminded of the organisation's social licence to operate, which could ensure a holistic understanding of role of public relations in organisational success.

Rounds 3 and 4 of the study aimed to provide a quantitative perspective on public relations and communication education. These rounds sought to determine the appropriate level at which public relations and communication should be taught to ensure their efficacy in achieving the desired social impact and value, which is integral to the future of public relations in South Africa. The credibility of the industry relies on its ability to demonstrate its influence in bringing about social change and meaningfully addressing social issues, which will ultimately influence organisations in the interconnected world. The findings underscored that an academic degree serves as the foundational point for public relations training in the country, and emphasised the necessity for continuous learning beyond this initial stage. Mentorship emerged as an additional crucial element to be incorporated into public relations training, and the significance of undergraduate-level public relations and communication qualifications was prominent. Beyond the question of the level at which public relations and communication should be taught, the study also shed light on the importance of the content included in these qualifications. According to the quantitative results, critical thinking, encompassing reflective practice, research, theories from diverse paradigms and disciplines, reasoning and argumentation emerged as central themes in public relations and communication training. Moreover, the findings highlighted the pivotal role of measurement and evaluation, incorporating data analytics. Notably, during quantitative Rounds 3 and 4 of the study, business management, covering project management, leadership, strategic thinking and proficiency in debate and negotiation techniques, stood out as central themes emphasised in public relations and communication training in South Africa.

Another aspect considered pertains to the target audience and stakeholders in public relations and communication training. The analyses revealed that public relations and communication training ought to cater to a diverse audience, including stakeholders in management and leadership, those within educational contexts, individuals aspiring to pursue careers in the field and the wider society. The educational approach should adopt an interdisciplinary framework, imparting universal skills that align with the social value and impact of public relations and communication training in South Africa.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This article focused on three key themes relevant to public relations in South Africa, namely the role and practice of public relations, the social impact and value of public relations, and their influence on public relations education. It captures the perspectives of 24 South African public relations practitioners, public relations educators and academics who participated in the four rounds of a Delphi study titled "The Future of PR and Its Social Impact and Value".

Important findings on the roles and practice of South African public relations practitioners highlight the strategic importance of communication and that most practitioners find themselves in senior and strategic roles in organisations. There seems to be a discrepancy between these roles and the value that senior decision makers place on communicators in the organisation. This apparent contradiction – where senior communication practitioners are appointed while support remains insufficient – may suggest a symbolic commitment to communication rather than a fully integrated strategy. It is worth considering whether this reflects a form of "window-dressing" or whether senior roles are occupied by figures with limited influence, reinforcing the need for a deeper structural analysis of communication support within organisations. This observation also aligns with the views expressed by Steyn and Everett (2008) about the sense of value public relations offers to organisations. Stakeholder engagement holds a prominent position in public relations practice; however, there was a concern raised that institutions such as government departments are not always truthful in their stakeholder engagements. This finding raises concerns about whether this was related to the high regard for ethical and responsible communication reported by the participants. Persuasive communication and the dissemination of information as important functions (seen as a tangible benefit of public relations) are being influenced by changes in the media landscape and digital platforms together with a lack of resources and support.

Another focus area of this article was the views of participants on the social value and impact of public relations and communication. It asked the critical question of the value these roles and professions contribute to organisations and the society they operate in. The question of value involves more than the normal reporting on publicity generated for an organisation and/or client, often based on questionable measuring instruments such as Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE) instead of using research methodologies to determine the measurable impact of public relations activities on organisations and communities. The lack of measurement and evaluation practices by public relations practitioners was also highlighted by Landsberg Boshoff (2023). South African participants identified social value as interventions that enabled real social change, relating to the cause and effect of public relations activities. Social impact was also seen as the result of social value – listening to stakeholder needs as a dynamic, context-specific aspect of public relations and communication.

The third focus area of this article involved public relations education and its alignment to, among other aspects, the social impact and value of public relations. Landsberg Boshoff (2023) noted that the average age of respondents in the measurement and evaluation study was lower than in previous years. These respondents also practised less measuring and evaluation of their public relations activities, which is concerning in light of well-known claims of integrated theory and practice approaches in higher education public relations qualifications. Integrating theory into current public relations practices seems to still be a concern, prompting participants in this study to call for a more effective integration of theory and practice.

LIMITATIONS

The study used a relatively small sample size, with 24 participants per country in each round of the Delphi study. While this aligns with typical Delphi methodology, it may limit the generalisability of the findings to the broader South African public relations landscape. The purposive sampling method may introduce selection bias as participants were selected based on specific characteristics deemed relevant to the study, potentially overlooking certain perspectives within the field. Moreover, qualitative data analysis involves subjective interpretation during open coding. While efforts were made to ensure reliability through independent coding, the subjectivity in qualitative analysis poses a potential limitation. Finally, the study primarily focuses on the South African context, potentially limiting the generalisability of findings to other cultural or geographical settings. Public relations practices and their social impact may vary across different regions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study offers valuable insights into the future of public relations and communication in South Africa, with a focus on practitioners' roles, social impact and educational needs. The research employed a Delphi methodology, engaging 24 South African experts across four iterative rounds to explore these critical areas. The findings revealed that South African public relations practitioners increasingly occupy senior strategic roles in organisations. However, a discrepancy exists between these elevated positions and the actual value and support given to communication functions at the operational level. This disconnect may suggest a symbolic rather than substantive commitment to strategic communication, highlighting the need for deeper structural analysis of communication support within organisations.

Stakeholder engagement emerged as a crucial aspect of public relations practice in South Africa. However, concerns were raised about the authenticity of these efforts, particularly in government institutions. This finding is particularly noteworthy when juxtaposed with the high regard for ethical and responsible communication reported by participants, indicating a potential gap between espoused values and actual practices.

The study underscores an evolving understanding of public relations' social impact and value among South African practitioners. Participants identified social value as interventions that enabled real social change, while social impact was seen as the measurable result of these activities. This nuanced perspective reflects a growing awareness of public relations' broader societal role beyond traditional organisational objectives. However, the research also highlighted a persistent lack of robust measurement and evaluation practices, echoing findings from previous studies in the South African context.

REFERENCES

Adi, A. & Stoeckle, T. (2023). The future of PR/Comms and their social impact: Results of an international Delphi-method study. Quadriga University of Applied Sciences.

Adi, A. (2022). The future of public relations. Unpublished notes. Berlin: Quadriga University of Applied Sciences.

Africa PR & Communications Report. (2023). *Leveraging Strategic Communication for Africa's Growth*. Africa PR & Communications Report. https://africaprreport.com/

Barber, N.A. & Venkatachalam, V. (2013). Integrating social responsibility into business school undergraduate education: A student perspective. *American Journal of Business Education*, 6(3):385–396.

Benecke, D.R. (2019). *Social representation of PR activism: Perceptions of early career public relations professionals in South Africa*. Doctoral thesis. Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg.

Benecke, D.R; Muir, C; Porthen, D; Van Wyk, H & Du Plessis, N. (2021). The role of the Global Capability Framework within the strategic communication profession in an emerging post COVID-19 context: A South African perspective. *ESSACHESS - Journal for Communication Studies*, 14(27):137–159.

Callista, L. (2023). What to watch out for in Africa's growing PR potential. *The PR Insider*. Available from: https://curzonpr.com/theprinsider/what-to-watch-out-for-in-africas-growing-pr-potential.

Campaign Collective. (2018)a. Definition of social impact of communications launched. *Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA)*. Available from: https://campaigncollective.org/2018/10/30/definition-of-social-impact-of-communications-launched/

Campaign Collective. (2018)b. Project to increase social impact of communications launched. *Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA)*. Available from: https://campaigncollective.org/2018/08/14/project-to-increase-social-impact-of-communications-launched/

Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE). (2023). *Navigating change: recommendations for advancing undergraduate PR education*. CPRE 50th Anniversary Report. Commission on Public Relations Education.

Coombs, W.T & Holladay, S.J. (2013). *It's not just PR: PR in society*. 2nd ed. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Dalkey, N.C. & Helmer O. (1963). An experimental application of the Delphi method to the use of experts, *Management Science*, 9(3):458–467.

De Bruin, T. & Rosemann, M. (2007). Using the Delphi Technique to identify BPM capability areas. *ACIS 2007 Proceedings*. Association for information systems. Available from: Using the Delphi Technique to Identify BPM Capability Areas (core.ac.uk)

Dühring, L. (2015). Lost in translation? On the disciplinary status of public relations. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 4(1):5–23.

El Rafie, R. (2024). The evolution of public relations in Africa: A five-year retrospective. *Africa.com*. Available from: https://www.africa.com/the-evolution-of-public-relations-in-africa-a-five-year-retrospective-by-rania-el-rafie/

Engels, T.C.E & Kennedy, H.P. (2007). Enhancing a Delphi study on family-focused prevention. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, 74:433–451.

Fawkes, J. (2018). The evolution of public relations research – an overview. *Communication and Society*, 31(4): 59–171.

Gregory, A. (2004). *Public relations in practice*. 2nd ed. Kogan Page. VA.

Gregory, A. (2023). Some thoughts on the challenges of measurement and evaluation (M&E) in the field of public relations. *Organicom, Revista Brasileira de Comunicação Organizacional e Relações Públicas*, 20(42):104–107. Available from: https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2238-2593.organicom.2023.210946

Guba, E.G. & Lincoln, Y.S. (1982). Epistemological and methodological bases of naturalistic inquiry. *Eurasian Chemico-Technological Journal*, 30(4):233–252. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02765185

Hagelstein, J., Einwiller, S. & Zerfass, A. (2021). The ethical dimension of public relations in Europe: Digital channels, moral challenges, resources, and training. *Public Relations Review*, 47(4).

Kent, M.L. & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 28 (1):21–37.

Landsberg Boshoff, T. (2023). SA PR Measurement Landscape Report 2023. Johannesburg: PRISA. https://ornico.co/tag/pr-landscape-report/Lee, K. (2020). A phenomenological exploration of the student experience of online PhD studies. *International Journal of Doctoral Students*, 15:575–593. Available from: https://doi.org/10.28945/4645

Linneberg, M.S. & Korsgaard, S. (2019). Coding qualitative data: A synthesis guiding the novice. *Qualitative research*. Available from: DOI: 10.1108/QRJ-12-2018-0012

Meyer, I. (2017). A metamodern stakeholder relationship management model for non-profit organisations. Doctoral thesis. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

Meyer, I. & Barker, R. (2020). A metamodern model for managing stakeholder relationships in non-profit organisations. *Communicare*, 39(1):56–79.

Nasa, P., Jain, R. & Juneja, D. (2021). Delphi methodology in healthcare research: How to decide its appropriateness. *World Journal of Methodology*, 11(4):116–129. Available from: Delphi methodology in healthcare research: How to decide its appropriateness - PMC (nih.gov)

Okoli, C. & Pawlowski, S.D. (2004). The Delphi method as a research tool: An example, design considerations and applications. *Information & Management*, 42:15–29.

Pieczka, M. (2019). Looking back and going forward: The concept of the public in public relations theory. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 8(3):225–244.

Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) Africa and African Public Relations Association (APRA). (2024). 2024 PRCA Africa APRA Report. Available at: PRCA newsroom [Accessed 1 April 2025].Rensburg, R. & Cant, M. (2009). *Public relations: African rerspectives*. 2nd ed. Sandton, South Africa: Heinemann.

Rubin, A.T. (2021). Rocking qualitative social science: An irreverent guide to rigorous research. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Available from: https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=BZE2EAAAQBAJ

Sablatzky, T. (2022). Delphi method. *Hypothesis*, 34. Available from: https://doi.org/10.18060/26224

Sriramesh, K. (2007). The relationship between culture and public relations. In E.L. Toth (ed.). *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management: challenges for the next generation*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 507–526.

Steyn, B. & Everett, T. (2008). International comparative study indicates different PR roles in South Africa and the UK, using the same measuring instrument. *Tripodos*, 24:95–105. Available from: https://tripodos.com/index.php/Facultat_Comunicacio_

Suárez-Monsalve, A.-M. (2022). Evolution of the public relations profession in Latin America: A brief review of the development of public relations in Latin American countries. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 11(2):257–274.

Trialogue. *Business in Society Handbook*. (2023). 26th ed. https://trialogue.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Trialogue-Business-in-Society-Handbook-2023.pdf.

Van Heerden, G. & Rensburg, R. (2005). Public relations roles empirically verified among public relations practitioners in Africa. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 24(1):69–88.

Verwey, S. (2015). Paradigms, perspectives and practices of public relations and communication: Implications for "disciplined imagination" in South African scholarship. *Communitas*, 20:1–25.

Wehmeier, S. (2009). Out of the fog and into the future. Directions of public relations theory building, research, and practice – a Delphi study. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 34(2):265–282.

Zhang, X. A. & Neill, M.S. (2023). Incorporating virtue ethics in public relations ethics education: Lessons from a standalone public relations ethics course. *Journal of Public Relations Education*, 9(2):1–24.

Zerfass, A, Verčič, D. & Wiesenberg, M. (2016). The dawn of a new golden age for media relations? How PR professionals interact with the mass media and use new collaboration practices. *Public Relations Review*, 42(4):499–508.

Sustainability and Expectations in Client-Public Relations Agency Relationships: A Bi-directional Perspective

AUTHOR(S)

Yolanda Makhubele

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8369-6917

Anna Oksiutycz

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7236-0924

Elizabeth Lubinga

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1811-7421

PUBLISHED ONLINE

Volume 44 (1) May 2025

Pages 124-136

Submitted April 2024

Accepted March 2025

DOI

10.36615/e8wdwe12

ISSN

Online 2957-7950

Print 0259-0069

Abstract

The sustainability of public relations agencies is often heavily dependent on positive and vibrant relationships with their clients. Such relationships are crucial during challenging economic conditions and intense competition prevalent within the sphere. Public relations agencies in South Africa face a challenge to prove that they are able to contribute positively to their clients' bottom line by meeting these expectations. Good relationships lead to higher client retention for agencies, improvement in the client's return on their investment and it also contributes towards organisational sustainability for the benefit of both parties. This article investigates expectations of client–public relations agency relationships in South Africa as key elements influencing the relationship between the parties. An exploratory qualitative study was conducted. It involved in-depth interviews with six client representatives and six senior public relations consultants from three prominent public relations agencies operating in Johannesburg. The findings indicate that expectations, competencies and communication inform perceptions of how clients and public relations agencies view the relationship and then try to achieve relationship outcomes. To maintain or expand their client base, public relations agencies need to create value for the client organisations and build relationships and mutual understanding with their clients.

Keywords

Agency, client–agency relationships, public relations, relationship expectations, sustainability, value creation

INTRODUCTION

South Africa's public relations (PR) agencies and the industry need to constantly improve their services in order to remain competitive and sustainable. South Africa has a thriving PR industry with a history going back to the 1940s. Today, the PR agency landscape in South Africa includes a mix of multinational and local agencies. Global players such as Edelman, Weber Shandwick, FleishmanHillard and Ketchum (through its affiliate in South Africa, Magna Carta) have their footprint in the country. Bizcommunity (2025), a business-to-business publisher, has listed over 100 communication agencies that listed PR among the services offered. Still, the need for organisational sustainability is compounded during times of economic hardship that these agencies face in South Africa. Sutton et al. (2024) argue that agencies are not only battling a hostile competitive environment in South Africa, but also fighting to survive in declining economic conditions defined by volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) business contexts. PR agencies in South Africa are increasingly operating in a highly competitive business environment in which organisations prioritise other organisational functions in a bid to manage their bottom line and ensure their economic sustainability.

The organisational sustainability of PR agencies is strongly linked to their ability to sustain relationships with their clients. Longevity and quality of client–agency relationships are crucial to the sustainability of PR agencies mainly because services offered to clients are the source of income. Authors such as Ziegele (2024) and Ceccotti et al. (2020) specifically argue for good quality agency–client relationships to ensure longevity, adding that relationship quality involves the balance between expectations and perceptions of the client, on the one hand, and the agency, on the other. Stein (2016) argues that good client–agency relationships rely on trust, communication and understanding. These relationships need maintenance (Sidhu, 2014), commitment (Levin et al., 2019) and a shared set of values (Fam & Waller, 2008). Analogous references to marriage (Sidhu, 2014) when examining client–agency interactions emphasise their symbiotic importance. Viewing this relationship as a marriage implies that both parties act in each other's best interest. Such a bond adds stability to the client–PR agency relationship, which is a barrier to its termination (Sidhu, 2014). The advantages of such close relationships include decreased opportunism (Chohan et al., 2019), higher levels of trust and better agency performance (Levin & Lobo, 2011). Examining what undermines the sustainability of client–PR agency relationships is relevant to this discussion.

Unfortunately, client–agency relations are often short-lived (Ceccotti et al., 2020) due to dissatisfactions that arise between both parties and the divergent objectives. Therefore, there is a need to study the expectations that underlie such relationships, which, if unmet, cause breakdowns in interactions. A breakdown in relationships can result in the termination of a client contract (Davies & Prince, 2011). This leads to a business problem: a loss in revenue for the agency and time for the client organisation. As retaining clients and PR agencies is more cost- and time-effective than acquiring new ones (Davies & Prince, 2011), it is in agencies' best interest to understand and maintain client–agency relationships. This helps to sustain their revenue stream. It also allows the client organisation to save time because they would not need to acquire new agencies. Previous studies have focused on the process and structure of relationships (Keegan et al., 2017) and have not accounted for the interactions and the perspectives of organisational representatives participating in these interactions. Many studies have researched either the client perspective (Jensen & Sund 2020) or the agency perspective (Bridgen, 2022; Ceccotti et al., 2020; Sisson, 2015; Sutton et al., 2024) while this study includes the perspectives of both the clients and the agency staff on the relationship expectations between the two parties.

The study intended to answer the following questions:

- What are clients' expectations regarding their relationships with selected major PR agencies in Johannesburg, South Africa?
- What are PR consultants' expectations about relationships with their clients among selected PR agencies in Johannesburg, South Africa?
- What are the causes of relationship termination between clients and PR agencies?
- How can client–PR agency relationships be sustained among selected major agencies in Johannesburg, South Africa?

The article is organised as follows. First, we discuss the literature on agency–client relationships from the perspective of mutual interests and value creation. Then we focus on unpacking the merits and challenges of the agency–client relationships as partnership. In the last section of the literature review we discuss the dynamics, factors and characteristics of different stages of relationships from inter-organisational and the interpersonal perspectives. The next section explains the methodology used in this study and this is followed by the description of the results, discussion and conclusion.

Client–agency bi-directional relationships and value creation

The agency medium- to long-term survival depends to a large extent on relationships with the clients. The relationships depend on the interplay between shared objectives, values, interests and expectations. Early research on the nature of relationships highlighted such characteristics as mutuality and interdependence (Broom et al., 2000; Hung, 2008). Increasingly, clients require justification for marketing and PR communication and its effect on the bottom line of organisations (Verwey, 2015). Conversely, the agencies are business entities that strive for economic success of their own; thus the relationship must be mutually beneficial.

A co-creative approach seems to work for mutual benefits between the client and agency. Especially in service-dominant environments (Frow & Payne, 2011) and knowledge-intensive business services, such as communication agencies (Hughes & Vafeas, 2019), customers and organisations are co-creators of value through interactive processes that combine tangible and intangible resources. Such an approach changes the focus from value creation as a function of a service provider to a co-creative perspective, where value arises from a collaborative process between parties (Corsaro, 2020; Skjølsvik, 2017). Value created through collaboration between communications agencies and clients contributes to the goals of the agency and the client, which the parties achieve in their own operations or from the products offered to customers (Sthapit & Bjork, 2020). Clients co-create communication "products" such as strategies and other content through collaborating with creative, account management and other staff from agencies. However, research shows that, in some instances, collaboration can lead to value no-creation or value co-destruction (Corsaro, 2020; Straphit & Bjork, 2020). During value no-creation, the expectations of resource integration and the respective value outcome remain unfulfilled (Makkonen & Olkkonen, 2017). When value is co-destructed, the parties reduce the value they previously co-created (Corsaro, 2020).

Client–agency relationships as partnerships

The relationship between an agency and its client embodies a strategic partnership (Verčič et al., 2018), which occurs in a business-to-business context, with significant commitment and consequences for both sides. However, Verčič et al. (2018:158) note that there is a power disparity between the parties: "[T] here is no absolute need for organisations to hire agencies, while it is an absolute need for agencies to find clients". Power disparity could result in unequal value appropriation, which means that the actors do not necessarily appropriate created value in proportions corresponding to their inputs (Corsaro, 2020; Ellegaard et al., 2014). In turn, this may lead to relationship dissatisfaction. Conversely, the PR agency has more information about the services provided to the client and the effects of these services, which highlights the principal–agent problem in the relationships where there are various degrees of information asymmetry between the parties. Eisenhardt (1989) suggests that the information asymmetry is reduced in a long-term relationship because the parties learn about each other and are able to evaluate behaviour more efficiently, while short-term relationships result in higher information asymmetry between principal and agent. Long-term relationships are therefore more beneficial to both clients and agencies.

Despite extensive research on the nature of organisation–stakeholder relationships (Shafiee & Tabaeeian, 2021; Verčič et al., 2018), there is no definite answer to what factors determine the sustainability of the relationship. Sisson (2017) notes the importance of perceptions and expectations in a relationship, and Gottfredson at al. (2022) also agree. When both parties perceive the relationship as beneficial, the relationship can be considered satisfying (Sisson, 2017). Research suggests that sustainability of the relationship depends on the relationship's quality and satisfaction and a balance between the perceptions and expectations of both parties. Relationship quality is a higher order construct that reflects the overall strength of relationships (Hani et al., 2021) and is based on the expectations, needs, desires and goals of the parties. In some cases, the clients are sourced through personal networks by agency management.

Some studies consider trust, satisfaction and commitment as dimensions of relationship quality (Shafiee & Tabaeeian, 2021). Ziegele (2024) emphasises a dual-phased nature of trust in client–agency relationships, arguing that trust is a pre-requisite of a quality relationship, because fundamental trust is needed to enter into a relationship, but that it is also an outcome of relationship quality. Trust facilitates long-term partnerships, while mistrust leads to emotional tensions in relationships (Vejnovic et al., 2024). In assessing the relationships, the parties also consider "alternative quality", which Rusbult et al. (1998:359) define as the "perceived desirability of the best available alternative to a relationship". This means that agencies and clients remain in a relationship as long as their relationship offers perceived advantages rather than alternatives. In addition to alternative quality, Xu (2019) notes that commitment in a relationship is predicted by two other variables, namely investment size (the scale and significance of the resources associated with a relationship) and relationship satisfaction. Satisfaction is identified as "favorable response to the reinforcement of positive expectations" (Grunig & Huang, 2000:45). Relationship quality and satisfaction can be considered factors in sustainable relationships. Sustainable relationships are relationships with long-term orientation and desired quality.

Research also points to the importance of "chemistry" or affinity in relations between the agency team and the client (Bridgen, 2022; Ceccotti et al., 2020). Client–agency relationships depend on people with different roles and responsibilities on both sides working together. Interpersonal relations between representatives of companies influence business relationships. For example, good personal relationships between clients and account managers impact client–agency relationships. Collaboration strategies such as communication, collaborative working, role clarification and sharing know-how are also crucial to maintaining a positive relationship (Turnbull & Wheeler, 2016).

For agencies, knowing clients and ensuring a sustainable relationship with them means a stable income, prestige and a higher profit margin (Turnbull & Wheeler, 2016). Similarly, in South Africa, a study by Mokoena et al. (2023) identified profitable revenue, ability to retain clients, creativity and healthy profit margins as the indicators of an advertising agency's sustainability. For the clients, working with the right agency leads to attaining business outcomes. Hence, clients expect agencies to have strategic capabilities and to add value to their business (Oksiutycz & Nhedzi, 2018; Turnbull & Wheeler, 2016). Research in South Africa indicates that clients mostly seek creativity, innovation and solutions to business problems (Mokoena et al., 2023). In long-term relationships, agencies can achieve a better understanding of their clients' business. This competency is highly rated by clients (Huges & Vafeas, 2019). Long-term relationships allow agencies to avoid incurring costs associated with switching agencies. These costs include the time, effort, money and psychological burden of establishing a relationship with a new agency (Davies & Prince, 2011).

Client–agency relationships stages

Three life stages can be distinguished in client–agency relationships: choosing an agency, maintaining a relationship with the agency and terminating the relationship with the agency (Verčič et al., 2018). During each of these stages, different aspects play a key role. Among the main factors influencing the selection of an agency are creative skills, expertise, cost, past success, professionalism, reputation and the efficient delivery of communication services (Brennan, 2015; Oksiutycz & Nhedzi, 2018; Turnbull & Wheeler, 2014). However, Henke (1995) indicates that, in established relationships, the role of creativity and cost-consciousness somewhat diminishes.

Based on the literature on inter-organisational relationships (Broom et al., 2000; Hani, 2021; Hesling et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018; Park and Rhee, 2010; Stafford, 2010; Xu, 2019) the following behavioural inter-organisational relationships maintenance strategies can be identified: reciprocity (exchange of information and resources), openness (being honest and able to directly discuss the nature of relationships), collaboration (cooperation in solving mutual or individual problems) and communication (communication quality and information exchange). These strategies are further supported by attitudinal and cognitive dimensions such as trust, commitment, integrity, attachment, positivity and respect.

As a factor affecting relationship quality, trust is particularly valued throughout the client–agency relationship life cycle (Hani, 2021; Hesling et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018) In the case of inter-organisational relationships, not only qualities such as reliability, competence and benevolence are important but also other dimensions derived from the organisational structures and systems, such as, reliability and consistency, play a role (Wiebel et al., 2022). Trust denotes the confidence of one party in exchange for a partner's reliability and integrity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Without trust, it may not be logical for the agency to invest in a relationship with the client, given the possibility of the client switching agencies or failing to extend the contract with the agency. "The more the client trusts an agency, the higher the perceived value of the relationship by the client; consequently, one can expect a higher probability that the client will remain in the relationship" (Jansen van Rensburg, 2014:8). Other researchers highlight the importance of interpersonal relations in building trust between organisations (Weibel et al., 2020). Brennan (2015) suggests that people-centred means of maintaining trust within the client–agency relationship entail honesty, consideration for others, tact and the ability to motivate and support others. A South African study by Sutton et al. (2024) listed communication-related qualities such as openness and cooperation as the relationship maintenance strategies employed by agencies.

Levin et al. (2019) assert that agencies are evaluated by clients on two aspects, namely the benefits of core services delivered (economic dimension) and how the service was delivered (social dimension). The economic dimension is linked to costs and *output* factors, including the fulfilment of promises, satisfaction with the quality of work and delivering the work on time (Fam & Waller, 2008; Quebra et al., 2013). Duhan and Sandvik (2009) report that sometimes clients retain agencies with whom they have long-term relationships, even when costs increase.

Other studies highlight the role of emotional labour in maintaining client–agency relationships. The term relates to their ability to display emotions that are consistent with social, occupational and organisational norms (Fouquereau et al., 2018). Iszatt-White and Lenney (2020) argue that emotional labour in a professional context takes place within the context of ongoing relationships aimed at achieving complex and broadly shared goals. Practitioners have learnt to become skilled at managing their emotions in line with the different expectations of their clients (Yeomans, 2019). Research in South Africa hints at the role of emotional labour in maintaining the agency–client relationship. Sutton et al. (2024) identifies strategies, such as assurance, positivity and being unconditionally supportive, as relationship maintenance tools used by agencies in South Africa.

Clients cite dissatisfaction with agency performance as one of the main reasons for a breakdown in relationships. In contrast, agencies referred to changes in client policy as the most common reason for relationship breakdown (Turnbull & Wheeler, 2016). Other issues negatively affecting relationships include creative disagreements, conflict, a lack of knowledge of the client's business and processes, the ambiguity of objectives and expectations, different interpretations of situations and financial disagreements, and interpersonal issues (Verčič et al., 2018; Weibel et al., 2022). Communication is considered to be a symbolic part of relationships (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000) and is constitutive of relationships through constant negotiation and meaning creation (Koschmann, 2016). Conversely, inadequate, contradictory or ambiguous communication can lead to tension, conflict and the breakdown of relationships (Vejnovic et al., 2024).

Although agencies make an effort to build, understand and maintain a good agency–client relationship, the inability to meet the client's expectations and service delivery (Verčič et al., 2018) may lead to the termination of relationships. Therefore, understanding and managing expectations is essential for customer satisfaction in relation to professional service delivery (Turnbull & Wheeler, 2016). Given the subjective, socially constructed nature of client–agency relationships, client expectations, i.e. the perceived value of the benefits that clients seek from the purchase of a service (Sidhu, 2014), are fundamental in relationships to the extent that Skjølsvik (2017) argues that what the clients subjectively perceive as relevant to their context is more important than the objective service. Expectations influence the nature of interactions and the type of relationship that can be established between the client and the organisation (Jansen van Rensburg, 2014).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach to understand how individuals, both clients and PR consultants within agencies, interpret their relationship with each other within a business context. Participants were selected through heterogeneous sampling where different types of agency and client (large, medium, small, local and multinational) were selected. The study participants comprised six PR consultants from three large PR agencies based in South Africa's biggest city, Johannesburg, and six client representatives. These participants were not dyadic, i.e. there was no requirement that they work directly together. This was done to protect the anonymity of the participants. Qualitative research favours small samples in order to get in-depth information (Boddy, 2016). Hence, a sample of 12 was adequate due to data saturation.

Within the context of PR agencies, since the term client refers to the organisation and not individuals, two client representatives from each agency were selected to participate in this study. The client representatives were holders of senior positions and were the primary decision makers in matters pertaining to the continuity and sustainability of contracts with their agencies. The client representatives were chosen on the basis of their timescale involvement with the agencies and the number of consultants allocated to service the account. Client participants comprised two groups: clients with project-based contracts and clients with retainer-based contracts with agencies. The distinction between project-based contracts and retainer-based contracts was crucial because the type of contract affects the expectations that each client representative has of the client–agency relationship. The clients' representatives hold titles such as communication manager, PR manager, marketing manager, PR and marketing manager, brand communication manager and assistant to the CEO. Their tenure with the agency varied from two to five years.

Two senior PR consultants from each of the three agencies, Agency X, Agency Y and Agency Z, were interviewed. These senior consultants oversee heading up the client representative's account, meaning that they are the primary decision makers regarding issues pertaining to the service delivery of the account. Among the participants from the agencies, there were four senior consultants and two senior account managers. Most participants had been in their current position for two to three years. Five of them had been in the agency environment for a more extended period and had previously worked in other agencies in similar positions.

Ethical considerations were observed during the research process, which included obtaining permission from the University Faculty Research Ethics Committee, the organisations and the participants. Trustworthiness was prioritised to ensure the soundness of the study.

Data were collected using face-to-face semi-structured interviews. All interviews were conducted using the same interview guide. The interviews were recorded and field notes were taken for the researchers to refer back to when transcribing the interviews during the data analysis stage.

Thematic analysis was applied for data analysis. Thematic analysis of the data involved a three-step coding process consisting of summarising the transcripts, identifying themes and then comparing these themes with the literature. First, the interviews were re-read and then coded by two researchers to ensure inter-coder reliability. Second, commonalities, differences and unusual themes that arose were tabulated. Third, conclusions were drawn, which resulted in the generation of themes presented in the findings section.

FINDINGS

The findings indicate that although there are similarities in the perspectives of the clients and PR consultants about what contributes to sustainable relationships, there are also differences.

Choosing the agency

Reputation was identified as one of the key reasons for entering into relationships with a particular agency. However, most clients and consultants agreed that industry awards were not highly important in selecting an agency. Several participants observed that clients sometimes choose agencies based on their specialisations. For instance, clients approach them if the agency is known for specific niche services. According to both the client and agency participants, clients look for value for money – the cost of services plays some role in agency choice. Client Participant 9 highlighted the importance of professionalism and past experience in choosing the agency. This was echoed by an agency participant who said: "Clients want you to have done something similar before and that you have the right people to work on the account". In cases where the client had a good experience with the agency, they would make a referral or recommend that agency's services (Participants 7 and 8). One client participant stated that they had "inherited" the agency from their predecessor. Another important factor was having an understanding of the client's brief and business problem. Participant 11 stated: "We usually invite agencies to pitch. If an agency understands our message, has good company values and is cost-effective, then we choose them". Participants 10 and 12 expressed similar views that knowledge of the client's business and industry influenced agency selection. These findings align with previous studies by Turnbull and Wheeler (2014) and Brennan (2015).

Maintaining relationships

When discussing the existing relationships between clients and agencies, participants highlighted the following salient themes: relationship principles, the importance and the impact of personal relationships between the representatives of both parties, the nature of communication between the parties and the significance of expectations in the relationships.

Most participants stated they have good relations with the other party, and used expressions such as *open, flexible, likeable* and *good working relationships*. Openness, honesty and trust were mentioned as the foundation of good relationships, with clients also expecting flexibility. It appeared that flexibility in terms of communication meant expecting agency employees to always be available. One consultant reflected on the client–agency relationship when they had worked for a major corporation: "It was like borderline abusive. Things like […] client calling the agency at 10 pm for certain things". Several participants mentioned similar practices, which confirms that this is a common occurrence.

Personal relationships

Both clients and consultants noted the importance of personal relationships between the agency and client representatives. Agency Participant 2 said: "As a marketing manager and as a client service person from an agency, you build relationships". Participant 4 testified: "[I]f you don't have a personal rapport with someone, it is difficult to foster a close working relationship". The consultants also highlighted the importance of people skills. Participant 4 stated: "[I]f you are not doing the right work, you are not going to have the right relationships, but it's also taking it to a personal level, remembering their birthday […] and just being generally friendly". At the same time, a senior consultant pointed out possible pitfalls of long-term relationships: "[U]sually you get stuck in the same routine and people think this is how the client wants it. I have been on the account for years and this is what they want. When actually the client wants new ideas".

Communication

Communication constitutes a relationship (Koschmann, 2016), and it is a necessary condition to achieve relationship outcomes (Grunig & Huang, 2000). A senior consultant stated: "Lack of communication can break any relationship […] but it's easy to overlook that and get used to lack of communication". Considering that the client–agency relationship is more transaction-based initially, most of the communication pertained to the service level agreement. While understanding the importance of communication, the consultants and clients acknowledged numerous shortcomings in terms of communication between the parties. A senior account manager stated: "[W]e are not even communicating among ourselves, not communicating with the team, not communicating with the client". Several participants noted that communication between the parties was limited to monthly reports, monthly meetings and status checks. A marketing manager admitted: "I don't know if I always communicate [expectations]". While acknowledging that the current communication was not optimal, both client representatives and consultants agreed that regular interaction, transparency and honesty were instrumental in instilling trust in the relationship. Agency Participant 6 said: "I guess in each step, there has to be clear communication on what's going on, what has been done so far and the turnover time".

Relationship expectations

After the partnership has been established, both the client and the agency commit to the partnership, on either a retainer or project basis. During this process, expectations about the agency's availability are formed. When it comes to quality relationships, the assessment of expectation fulfilment is crucial (Sisson, 2017). These include how services are delivered (agency competencies), interactions between both parties (communication) and the end result (relationship outcomes) (Quebra et al., 2013). This study supports the findings of prior research that clients seek agencies that respond quickly to their needs, are proactive, respond to unforeseen problems and have a quick turnaround time.

Many participating consultants described how clients expect them to work beyond their scope of work and deliverables, which is overservicing the account. This implies that the consultants believe that, in most cases, they are doing more work than they are contracted to do. Chohan et al. (2019) note the existence of bilateral opportunism in pre-contact and post-contract client–agency relationships. Because clients tend to have more power and money, some can be opportunistic by failing to lawfully abide by the terms of a formal contract. In an effort to secure the contract, agencies also engage in opportunistic practices such as misrepresenting their skills (Chohan et al., 2019). The agency consultants and the clients stated that they had experienced promises being made from the agency side that fell very short of being executed. In other words, the agency was seen to be overpromising and underdelivering. Nothhaft and Stenson (2019) attribute this industry-wide phenomenon to years of inadequate measurement and evaluation that results in unrealistic expectations and encourages the PR industry to consistently make exaggerated promises. Interestingly, some senior consultants have realised that this is the fault of the agency itself and not the client. The practice of overpromising is perpetuated because it has become a way of winning clients and because setting realistic expectations is often perceived as falling short of excellence (Nothhaft & Stenson, 2019).

Relationship termination

The reasons for terminating the relationships are summarised in Table 1. Generally, clients and agencies identified similar causes of relationship demise. The reasons vary and range from negative perceptions about fulfilling expectations to changes in personnel. Some of the issues had to do with the agency's performance, such as not delivering on the contractual obligations or not innovating. Others pointed to external influences such as budget cuts or the general economic climate.

Table 1: Causes of relationship termination

Client perspective	Agency perspective
Lack of innovation Budget cuts Changing teams on both sides Not meeting expectations Not being proactive External circumstances: economy, change of agency ownership Missing opportunities that could be of use to the client	Company moving in a different direction Budget cuts Not innovating Agency management failures Agency overpromising on the impact of their services No loyalty from clients Personality clashes

Sometimes, even a good relationship may result in the client not wanting to renew their contract. It may not be rational for the agency to invest in a relationship with the client, given the possibility of the client switching agencies or failing to extend the contract with the agency. This also leads both parties in the relationship to view the client–agency relationship as short-term and essentially as a transactional relationship (Brennan, 2015:131). Thus, even if the client is satisfied with the agency, the increasing need for short-term contracts poses a threat to the sustainability of client–agency relationships. Under certain circumstances, short-term relationships may be more beneficial for both parties.

Ensuring sustainable relationships

When asked about the aspects that lead to sustainability, most participants mentioned various issues related to fulfilling contractual obligations. These aspects included providing good service (meeting the clients' criteria) and providing expertise to the clients. Several agency and client participants recognised the importance of innovation. A senior consultant cited: "[B]eing bold enough to take them [the clients] into a different direction". Participant 11 observed that "being creative and pushing boundaries" are factors that lead to relationship sustainability. On a practical level, a senior account manager suggested that, to ensure innovation, teams in the agency should be rotated and assigned to different clients to provide a new perspective. Some participants mentioned the importance of regular and honest communication for the sustainability of relationships. For agency consultants, honesty meant managing client expectations about what was possible and reasonable to achieve. The main factors contributing to sustainability of relationships are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Ensuring sustainable relationships

Client perspective	**Agency perspective**
Keeping up with the service level agreement Providing expert advice Agency creativity "Pushing boundaries" Communication	Providing good service Educating client about possibilities Client management Being innovative Planning

Surprisingly, neither the consultants nor the client representatives expected closer collaboration and joint problem solving to form part of the relationship. A senior account manager stated: "[Y]ou get clients who don't involve their agency". It appears that a dominant perspective regarding relationships was that the clients wanted the agencies to be expert service providers and offer business solutions. As expressed by a marketing manager: "I expect you to be experts in that because you are my go-to agency". This is also the perspective that is largely accepted by agency participants. Collaboration was viewed as undermining their competence. Nevertheless, there were some hints that the collaborative approach was seen as beneficial, especially from the agency perspective. Agency Participant 3 said:

> They [the client's team] come to me for advice, to bounce ideas off. Often, you are an extension of that client team, and they do not necessarily have all the answers, but you are being exposed to a bit more and you might have the answers.

Another senior consultant defined the job of the agency as providing the client with choices. He said: "Our role as consultants is to give them options, but at the end of the day, they are decision makers".

DISCUSSION

Client–PR agency relations comprise a dynamic process that evolves over time, and while the perceptions of clients' representatives and PR consultants are somewhat aligned, there are also some differences.

Clients' expectations about relationships with PR agencies

The study indicates that the clients' expectations regarding PR agencies are influenced by the stage of relationship between the two parties. At the relationship initiation stage, when the client chooses the agency, reputational aspects, including past experience working with the agency, agency expertise and perceived professionalism, play an important role. In addition, economic factors such as cost efficiency play a crucial in the selection of an agency, which is not surprising considering the tight economic conditions under which South African PR agencies operate. As the relationship moves to the relationship maintenance stage, other factors take prominence, which we can cluster around three main dimensions: relational, communication and the quality of service. Among the desired qualities guiding the relationships, honesty, flexibility, openness and commitment to the client were highlighted by the client participants. Clients' communication-related expectations included frequent interaction, feedback, regular follow-ups and easy access to consultants (availability). Service quality expectations included awareness of trends, meeting the client's criteria, timeliness of delivery, achieving desired objectives, understanding the client's industry and showing care for the client's business. Although the participants did not use the term value creation, the latter three factors imply the prominence of value creation as one of the reasons for relationship maintenance.

PR consultants' expectations about relationships with their clients

From the agency side, the perceptions around why agencies are selected by the clients primarily overlapped with those provided by the clients – reputation in the industry and among past clients. In addition, agency professionalism and cost to clients were cited. Furthermore, the PR consultants were aware that they were expected to create value for the client. It was noted that they did not see value creation as a collaborative effort but rather as an agency obligation towards the client. This finding does not support previous studies (e.g. Corsaro, 2020; Skjølsvik, 2017) that place importance on the co-creational aspects of value creation. Among value-creation factors, the PR consultants stressed the importance of contributing to the client's business performance, i.e. getting impactful results for the client. Similar findings were reported by Mokoena et al. (2023). The consultants also indicated that their clients valued innovation and bold solutions provided by agencies. The findings indicate that the agency participants emphasised the importance of interpersonal relationships between them and clients as a factor in successful relationship maintenance. In addition, PR consultants indicated power disparity in relationships, which manifested itself in an unreasonable industry culture whereby clients expected that the consultants should be available at any time, even outside regular working hours. The same power imbalance existed where the need for agencies to exist and retain clients led to agencies overpromising what they could deliver, which in turn led to the client's dissatisfaction. The overpromising can be attributed to what Bilby et al. (2023) call *clientelism* – a phenomenon arising from fear of losing the client, which manifests itself in PR consultants pandering to the client. In the end, this has negative consequences for both sides.

Towards sustainable client–PR agency relationships

From the study's findings, the emphasis on building and maintaining relationships to ensure longevity on the part of agencies and clients cannot be understated. Although indirectly, both parties acknowledged that value needs to be created within the relationship in order for it to be sustainable. The stakeholder theoretical perspective places emphasis on value creation by both the organisation and its interest groups, including the PR agency and its clients. However, our study indicates that the notion that value co-creation supersedes economic considerations to encompass a variety of benefits remains normative. While many different factors influenced client–agency relationships in the selected PR agencies in Johannesburg, there was little evidence that the parties actively engaged in value creation as a joint effort. On the one hand, the clients saw value as an agency deliverable; on the other hand, PR consultants saw the value they created for their clients as evidence of their expertise and reason to exist.

Both clients and agencies suggested that there should be open and dialogic communication between them to ensure the sustainability of the relationship. Some agency representatives noted that they often lacked open communication during both internal and external communication. They specified that they met once a month for informational purposes. This practice offers little room for maintaining and sustaining internal relationships within their own agencies, which is crucial to supporting external communication. At the same time, they did not efficiently communicate externally, as one participant mentioned, and they did not always communicate their expectations. Researchers argue that open communication is important for sustainable relationships. As Slabbert (2016) notes, communication can be a form of relationship maintenance. It can do so by assisting in formalising deliverables, defining the agency's role, and eliminating any opportunities for the agency to overpromise and underdeliver.

Existent threats beyond the control of the parties, such as challenging economic conditions, were also identified as important factors affecting relationship sustainability. In line with previous studies conducted in other parts of the globe (Turnbull & Wheeler, 2016; Verčič et al., 2018), this study indicates that the realisation of contractual obligations and technical expertise are some of the most cited expectations among both the clients and agencies.

CONCLUSION

This study presents findings from research on client–PR agency relationships based on the qualitative study of agencies and their clients in South Africa's commercial capital, Johannesburg. The study reveals that the fulfilment of expectations and value creation are the key elements of sustainable quality relationships. Clients expect their consultants to act with their best interests in mind, provide guidance and advice when requested and always be available to them. From an agency's perspective, managing client's expectations about what is possible to deliver was a solid and positive condition for achieving sustainable relationships.

Value creation is a significant contributing factor to sustainable relationships. Clients expect to have strong relationships with agencies that are proactive, respond to unforeseen problems and have a quick turnaround time. In addition, clients and agencies see innovation, creativity and "pushing boundaries" as the engines for value creation. For project-based and retainer contracts, clients expect agencies to be available to them and provide expertise by providing advice and suggestions. At the same time, they expect agencies to scan and be aware of their business landscape to spot opportunities. However, despite the symbiotic nature of this relationship, the parties only acknowledged to a limited extent that the value was co-created through mutual effort.

There are many agencies in South Africa that have a global footprint, and, to a large extent, South African PR agencies have adopted the international (Western) business models. In addition, operational models and structures that lead to a specific industry culture have diffused through the industry over the years. As a result, the findings of this study largely overlap with international studies on client–agency relationships.

This study is not without limitations. The study participants were not linked in dyadic relationships. Future studies should consider studying participant clients involved in relationships with agencies. Furthermore, research should be conducted on a wider pool of client–PR agency relationships or in-depth research on project-based and retainer-contract relationships separately. Nonetheless, studies such as this one are crucial for gaining insight into what is needed for the sustainability and productivity of client–PR agency relationships.

REFERENCES

Bilby, J., Koslow, S. & Sasser, S.L. (2023). Fear in Adland: How client risk aversion and agency clientelism limit the development of great creative campaigns. *Journal of Advertising*, 52(1) 57–74, DOI: 10.1080/00913367.2021.1981497

Bizcommunity. (2025). *Companies*. Available from: https://www.bizcommunity.com/Companies/196/1.html

Boddy, C.R. (2016). Sample size for qualitative research. *Qualitative Market Research*, 19(4):426–432. https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-06-2016-0053

Brennan, R. (2015). Management of the market research client/agency relationship. *Getting Better at Sensemaking*, 1:119–141.

Bridgen, E. (2022). Pitch imperfect: Power relations and ceremonial values in the public relations pitching process. *Media Practice and Education*, 23(4):347–364.

Broom, G.M., Casey, S. & Ritchey, J. (2000). Concept and theory of organisation-public relationships. In J.A. Ledingham, & S. D. Bruning (eds.). *Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations*. New York: Routledge, 3–22.

Ceccotti, F., Vernuccio, M. & Mattiacci, A. (2020). The evolution of agency-client relationships within the communication network in Italy: The perspective of communication partners. *Sinergie: Italian Journal of Management*, 37(3):64–84.

Chohan, R., Watson, R. & Pitt, L. (2019). Perspectives: client–agency opportunism: how does it happen and what can we do about it? *International Journal of Advertising*, 38(8), 1303-1312, DOI: 10.1080/02650487.2019.1670531

Corsaro, D. (2020). Value co-destruction and its effects on value appropriation. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36:1–2:100–127. DOI: 10.1080/0267257X.2019.1696876

Davies, M.A.P & Prince, M. (2011). Switching costs and Ad agency client relationship longevity: An exploratory study. *Services Marketing Quarterly*, 32(2):146–159. DOI: 10.1080/15332969.2011.55760

Duhan, D. & K. Sandvik. (2009). Outcomes of advertiser-agency relationships: The form and role of cooperation. *International Journal of Advertising*, 28(5):881–919. doi:10.2501/S0265048709200941

Ellegaard, C.J., Medlin, C. & Geersbro, J. (2014). Value appropriation in business exchange– Literature review and future research opportunities. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29(3):185–198.

Eisenhardt, K.M. Agency Theory: 1989. An assessment and review. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14(1):57–74. https://doi.org/10.2307/258191

Fam, K.S. & Waller, D.S. (2008). Agency-client relationship factors across life-cycle stages. *Journal of Relationships Marketing*, 7(2):2017–236

Fouquereau, E., Morin, A. J. S., Lapointe, É., Mokounkolo, R., & Gillet, N. (2018). Emotional labour profiles: Associations with key predictors and outcomes. *Work & Stress*, 33(3):268–294. https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2018.1502835

Frow, P. & Payne, A. (2011). A stakeholder perspective of the value proposition concept. *European Journal of Marketing*, 45(1/2):223–240.

Gottfredson, R.K. & Wright, S.L. & Heaphy, E. (2022). A critical review of relationship quality measures: Is a fresh start needed? An agenda to move forward. J*ournal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*. 95:624–659.

Grunig, J.E. & Huang, Y. (2000). From organisational effectiveness to relationships indicators: Antecedents of relationships, public relationships strategies and relationships outcome. In J.A. Ledingham & SA Bruning (eds.). *Public relations as relationships management: a relational approach to study and practice in public relations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum: 23–53.

Hani, U., Wickramasinghe, A. & Kattiyapornpong, U. (2021). Reviving social banking using relationship quality dynamics in a developing country. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 29(7):574–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2021.1891127

Henke, L.L. (1995). A longitudinal analysis of the Ad agency–client relationship: Predictors of an agency switch. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 35(2):24–30.

Hessling, V., Åsberg M. & Roxenhall, T. (2018). Relationship commitment and value creation in sponsorship relationships. *Journal of Business-To-Business Marketing* 25(2):137–160. https://doi.org/10.1080/1051712X.2018.1454646

Hughes, T. & Vafeas, M. (2019). Marketing agency/client service-for-service provision in an age of digital transformation. *Journal of Business-To-Business Marketing*. 26(3–4):265–280.

Hung, C.F. (2008). Towards the theory of relationships management in public relations: How to cultivate quality relationships. In E.L. Toth (ed.). *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management*. Routledge: New York, 443–476.

Iszatt-White, M. & Lenney, P. (2020). Enacting emotional labour in consultancy work: Playing with liminality and navigating power dynamics. *Management Learning*, 51(3):314–335. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507620906580

Jansen van Rensburg, M. (2014). Uncovering client retention antecedents in service organisations. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 3(1):1–13.

Jensen, H. & Sund, K.J. (2020). Marketing challenges and advertising partner selection: exploring advertiser-agency relationships in the Danish media industry. *Nordic Journal of Media Management*, 1(2):297–313. DOI: 10.5278/njmm.2597-0445.4432

Jones, T., Ranaweera, C., Murray, J. & Bansal, H. (2018). A prototyping analysis of relationship marketing constructs: What constructs to use when. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 34:9–10, 865-901. DOI: 10.1080/0267257X.2018.152028.

Keegan, B.J., Rowley. & Tonge, J. (2017). Marketing agency–client relationships: Towards a research agenda. *European Journal of Marketing*, 51 (7/8):1197–223. doi:10.1108/EJM-10-2015-0712

Koschmann, M.A. (2016). A communication perspective on organisational stakeholder relationships: Discursivity, relationality, and materiality. *Communication Research and Practice*, 2(3):407–431, DOI: 10.1080/22041451.2016.1217383

Ledingham, J.A. & Bruning, S.A. (2000). Introduction: background and current trends in the study of relationships management. In J.A. Ledingham & SA Bruning (eds.). *Public relations as relationships management: A relational approach to study and practice in public relations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum: xi-xvii.

Levin, E. & Lobo, A. (2011). *Clients' expectations of their advertising agencies: Creativity and relationship management*. Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference 2011, Perth, Australia, 28–30 November.

Levin, E., Quach, T.N. & Thaichon, P. (2019). Enhancing client agency relationships quality in advertising industry – an application of project management. *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, 34(2):463–473. doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-08-2017-0186.

Makkonen, H. & Olkkonen, R. (2017). Interactive value formation in interorganizational relationships: Dynamic interchange between value co-creation, no-creation, and co-destruction. *Marketing Theory*, 17(4):517–535.

Mokoena, A., Prinsloo, J.J., Gawlik, R. & Pelser, T. (2023). A framework for the sustainability of advertising agencies in an emerging economy: The case of South Africa. *Journal of Marketing Communications* (29)1:46–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2021.1989613

Morgan, R.M. & Hunt, S.D. (1994). The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 58(3):20–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299405800302

Nothhaft, H. & Stensson, H. 2019. Explaining the measurement and evaluation stasis. A thought experiment and a note on functional stupidity. *Journal of Communication Management*. (23)3:213–227.

Oksiutycz, A & Nhedzi, A. (2018). Zimbabwean communication agencies: current state and future prospects. *Communicare*, 37(1):94–117.

Park, H. & Rhee, Y. (2010). Associations among relationship maintenance strategies, organisation-public relationships, and support for organisations: An exploratory study of the non-profit sector. *Prism* 7(2):1–16.

Quebra, B., Bick, G. & Abratt, R. (2013). Service quality of advertising and promotions agencies in South Africa. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 19(5):605–628.

Rusbult, C.E., Martz, J.M. & Agnew, C.R. (1998). The investment model scale: Measuring commitment level, satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size. *Personal Relationships*, 5(4):357–387.

Shafiee, M.M. & Tabaeeian, R.A. (2021). Integrating knowledge-responsibility-performance via supplier relationship management. *International Journal of Integrated Supply Management*, 14(4):445–466.

Sidhu, R. (2014). Communication and engagement. In R. Smith, D. King, R. Sidhu & D. Skelsey (eds.). *The effective change manager's handbook*. Gosport, Hampshire: Kogan Page, 210–256.

Sisson, D.C. (2017). Control mutuality, social media and organisation-public relationships: A study of animal welfare organisations. *Public Relations Review*, 43:179–189. doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.10.007

Skjølsvik, T. (2017). The impact of client-professional relationships in Ex ante value creation: A service-dominant logic perspective. *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*, 24(3):183–199. doi:10.1080/1051712X.2017.1345259

Slabbert, Y. (2016). A new conceptual framework to strengthen internal corporate image: A stakeholder-inclusive perspective. *Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research*, 42(2):253–275

Stafford, L. (2010). Measuring relationship maintenance behaviors: Critique and development of the revised relationship maintenance behavior scale. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 28(2), 278–303.

Stein, L. (2016). *Love Me Tender: Why Agencies and Clients Stay – And Why They Stray: The Secrets to Some Long-Term Adland Partnerships*. Available from: https://adage.com/article/agency-news/longstanding-agency-client-relationships-highs-lows/302674.

Sthapit, E. & Björk, P. (2020) Towards a better understanding of interactive value formation: Three value outcomes perspective. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23(6):693–706. DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2018.1520821

Sutton, L.B., Kloppers, E.M. & Bezuidenhout, L. (2024). Strategies utilised by communication agencies to build and maintain relationships with clients. *The Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management*, 6(1):a825. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajesbm.v16i1.825

Turnbull, S. & Wheeler, C. (2016). Exploring advertiser's expectations of advertising agency services. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 22(6):587–601. doi:10.1080/13527266.2014.920902

Vejnovic, E., Purchase, S. & Tarabashkina, L (2024). Marketing research agency, creative agency and client relationships: A study of relationship tensions. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 39(3):461–473.

Verčič, D., Tench, R. & Verčič, A.T. (2018). Collaboration and conflict between agencies and clients. *Public Relations Review*, 44:156–164.

Verwey, S. (2015). Paradigms, perspectives and practice of public relations and communication: Implication for 'disciplined imagination' in South African scholarship. *Communitas*, 20(1):1–25. Available from: https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/handle/11660/3765

Weibel, A., Sachs, S., Schafheitle, S. & Gaito, T. (2022). *Distrust: The Neglected Construct in Stakeholder Relations*. Paper presented at First International Network on Trust, FINT 2022, Charleston, South Carolina, United States.

Xu, S. (2019). Prioritising relationships: The investment model and relationship maintenance strategies in organisational crises. *Public Relations Review*, 45(101872):1–16.

Yeomans, L. (2019). *Public Relations as Emotional Labour*. London: Routledge.

Ziegele, D. (2024). Cultivating effective agency–client relationships: Reviewing the field and proposing a novel framework to measure relationship quality in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*. DOI:10.1080/1062726X.2024.2433240

Volume 44 (1) 2025

Communicare

Journal for Communication Studies in Africa

Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa facilitates scholarly discussion on communication phenomena in Southern Africa and how these are in conversation with other regions. *Communicare* aims to serve as a point of reference for local academic debate and geo-specific theorising, and invites articles that complement or counter global perspectives by amplifying and consolidating regional research and scholarship. The journal publishes original theoretical-conceptual and empirical articles regardless of paradigm, perspective or context, and welcomes a wide range of methodological approaches. *Communicare* publishes original articles in a wide range of communication sub- and related disciplines, including organisational communication, strategic communication, marketing communication, corporate communication, development communication, social change, political communication, gender communication, postcolonial studies, identity politics and politics of everyday life, celebrity studies, visual communication, internet studies, gaming, digital communication, new media, film studies, media studies, cultural studies, popular culture, and journalism.

ISSN
0259-0069 (Online)

open access