

A RHIZOMATIC AND DIALOGIC RENDEZVOUS WITH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION



Introduction and purpose of the study

The youth unemployment rate shows that job seekers between the ages of 15 and 24 increased from 61% in the previous three-month period to 62.1% in Q1 ('South Africa Jobless Rate Up to 32.9% in Q1', 2023). However, seven of the 10 critical skills needed in South Africa to gain employment (Khoee, 2023) are capabilities that are, in effect, developed when students study strategic communication. This indicates the need for strategic communicators who can facilitate dialogue and who understand how a coherent multimethodological approach to strategic communication can wrestle with multiparadigmatic, complex problems (Verwey, 2015) while applying innovative thinking and integrative complexity and possessing resilient interpersonal skills (Dutta, 2018). This study explores dialogue from two perspectives. The first is how dialogue, as strategic communication, can incrementally support social change from a transdisciplinary perspective. The second is how dialogic learning can help strategic communicators develop capabilities to facilitate true and authentic dialogue. The research explores how narratives of becoming can inform the development of future strategic communicators through dialogic learning.

Literature review

Dialogical communication rejects the notion of linearity and the idea that messaging and meaning can be controlled. It is ambiguous, flexible, inclusive of contrapuntal perspectives, focused on building I-You relations and encompassing heteroglossia and polyvocality (Bakhtin, 1981, 1987; Du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2014b; Kent, 2017). Thus, linear and top-down communication have become mostly redundant in communication practice, considering that meaning and messages need to be negotiated and that in the communication process, receivers control whether they want to accept, seek out, negate, and interpret a message (Holzhausen, 2014). Moreover, divergent and contested viewpoints about and within strategic communication are welcomed (Holtzhausen, 2014). Overton-de Kerk (2023) proposes that the strategic communication paradigm should explicitly make space for non-linearity, contextuality and complexity. These notions confirm the turn to dialogue, which has been hailed as "the most fundamental, the most radical and utterly transformative of the key elements of the newly emerging paradigm," as well as unlimited, de-absolutised and relational: truth will continue to change, as it constantly necessitates dialogue with others (Swidler, 1996:14-16). The cumulative presence of and claim for dialogue in today's post-truth society has greatly influenced what is seen as the crucial key factors in the theory and practice of learning: a shift from individual and cognitive elements to culture, interaction, and dialogue (Racionero & Padrós, 2010).

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This line of thinking, in contrast to the dualistic idea of the Cartesian self (Robinson, 2023), holds that the dialogical self is “social”, containing multiple voices and supporting the development of the capacity to imagine other people in the positions that we occupy while imagining ourselves in their positions (Hermans, 2001).

Methodology

Q methodology was used to explore theoretical and subjective dialogues about critical capabilities deemed necessary for future and current strategic communicators, to flourish in times of flux. The concourse resulted from four open dialogues (an award-winning head of strategy and a mid-level strategic communicator in the industry, a professor and an honours student in academia), as well as a comprehensive review of academic and industry literature. The Q-set comprised 48 statements and was derived through Fisherman’s block design, reviewed with an external researcher, verified at a post-grad boot camp and a complete pilot study incorporating 4 participants. The participants were 24 South African strategic communicators (4 honours students, 4 lecturers, 4 senior practitioners not from the University of Johannesburg, 4 alumni from the University of Johannesburg, 4 executive creative directors and 4 chief executive officers). Principal components factor analysis and varimax rotation were used. The low correlation indicated three distinct and diverse viewpoints, influenced by personal experience, reflective processes, social journeys, and worldview. In-depth post-sorting interviews and reflections allowed for rich data. Crib sheets (Watts & Stenner, 2012) were created, and each statement was interrogated abductively.

Results and conclusions

From the rhizomatic interpretation of the double-rich theory and data, three social perspectives emerged, interpreting strategic communication as an impactful professional and wide-ranging field, housing innovation in collaboration, entrepreneurial endeavours, and ways of seeing and making the world anew through imagination, creativity, and the willingness to explore ambiguous, fluid, and paradoxical encounters. The three viewpoints (stoic professionals, entrepreneurial activists who intend on social change, and cynical yet creative visionaries) reflect the complexity of a multiparadigmatic and complex South African industry and context and a need to allow for the becoming of future-fit strategic communicators.

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ROELA HATTINGH

Roela Hattingh finds meaning in writing and in teaching. The first line of her CV reads: "Words and the ways that meaning manages to pop up everywhere bewitch me". She has been a teacher for as long as she can remember and has engaged in different subjects (copywriting, drama, creative writing, strategic communication, English and Afrikaans) with children and students of all ages: kindergarten in Taiwan; primary and secondary school in South Africa; tertiary education at AAA School of Advertising, Vega School, University of Pretoria, Midrand Graduate Institute, Big Fish, Boston City Campus, and currently at the University of Johannesburg. Since becoming a full time lecturer at University of Johannesburg in 2015 her students have won the following awards: 2018 New Generation Outstanding Students Award (Gold) - Julia Ridderhof: Project Re-Imagine Plastic Loerie (Gold): Lion Matches - Palesa Tsele, Kristen Landsberg and Ronel Irvine. From collaboration with Christa van Zyl Prism (Silver) Student campaign of the year - Makoma Maponya: Hike for a Girl Child Prism (Bronze) Student campaign of the year - Carel Scheepers: One & A Half Bags project Ignition award (Gold): Lion Matches - Palesa Tsele, Kristen Landsberg and Ronel Irvine. From Collaboration with Christa van Zyl, Department of Graphic Design, UJ Ignition (special mention): Ama Kip Kip - Thabang Matsi, Tsakela Shivambu and Jamie Calf From collaboration with Christa van Zyl, Department of Graphic Design, UJ Pendoring (Gold): Lion Matches - Palesa Tsele, Kristen Landsberg and Ronel Irvine. From Collaboration with Christa van Zyl, Department of Graphic Design, UJ 2017 Ignition award - Carel Scheepers: One & A Half Bags project New Generation Outstanding Students Award (Gold) - Makoma Maponya: Hike for a Girl Child 2016 Ignition award - Plugged-In strategy for CaSIPO She develops bespoke creative thinking, writing, copywriting and strategic communication workshops for the branding and communication industry.

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PROF CORNE MEINTJES

Corne Meintjes is an Associate Professor of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. She has over 20 years academic experience and has developed and lectured 40 unique courses at six local and international institutions at various levels. She publishes in local and international journals on the topics of stakeholder engagement and branding and engages with the industry in numerous ways. She is passionate about enabling students to become agents of social change by co-construction of their knowledge and skills using an authentic, caring, technologically and otherwise connected and engaged learning eco-system.

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MANAGING ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE THROUGH INTERNAL COMMUNICATION: MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS' PERSPECTIVE



The world is changing at an unprecedented rate and organisations must continuously find ways to stay relevant. Top management is faced with an array of decisions and potential changes to ensure competitiveness in the market, whilst ensuring engaged and committed employees. To navigate this constantly changing environment, organisations employ the services of change management consultants.

However, the change process is notoriously intricate and challenging. For many employees, when confronted with change, a reaction process occurs where unconscious processes and habitual defence mechanisms arise. These defences can potentially hinder the way employees adapt to organisational change. This difficulty is amplified when change consultants do not have access to adequate information and resources from the relevant organisation – vital elements to the employment of both the change processes of sensemaking and sensegiving. Studies continuously indicate the importance of top management in providing support and access to information and internal resources. However, in many cases, they obstruct the change process leaving change consultants to navigate the change process with little internal support.

This exploratory study aims to decipher the process and contribute to the limited empirical South African data by investigating how sensemaking and sensegiving are used by change management consultants to facilitate the change management practice in South Africa, with specific consideration of how internal communication is used to facilitate this process. This research was conducted by semi-structured interviews with change consultants working within the South African context. Non-probability, snowball sampling was applied to identify change management consultants with more than five years of experience in business management or change management consulting firms working with JSE-listed companies in South Africa. The data were inductively analysed using a thematic analysis based on Zang and Wildemuth's (2009) eight step qualitative content analysis process.

The findings of this study show that both sensemaking (understanding of planned change) and sensegiving (conveying what was understood), are immensely impacted by the openness of top management. Openness to share information and resources, and also to receive information and feedback. Furthermore, organisations with well-developed internal platforms that are data-driven and have the functionalities of segmenting audiences and extracting and measuring performance have an enormous benefit to change consultants as they do not have to put these channels in place.

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DELMARI VAN ZYL

Delmari van Zyl completed her Master's Degree in Strategic Communication through the University of Johannesburg in 2023. She focused her studies on Change Communication as she is especially interested in the human reaction to change - especially within the South African context where change fatigue is an ever-increasing reality.

Her previous qualifications include Post Graduate Diplomas in Internal Communication (EIC in Ireland) and Business Management (NWU Business School). She is currently working for the L'Oreal, the world's biggest cosmetics company, at their head office in Paris. Delmari specializes in International Sustainability Media for the Group on Corporate level.

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PROF ANNA OKSIUTYCZ

Anna Oksiutycz is an Associate Professor in the Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. Anna has expertise in strategic communication, business management, marketing communication and research. She teaches research and strategic communication modules on undergraduate and postgraduate courses and has successfully supervised many postgraduate students, including over 50 honours students and 20 masters' students.

As the Editor-in-Chief of *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, Anna champions academic debate and promotes the contribution of African scholars to global theory and research in communication.

She participated in collaborative research and teaching projects with several organisations, including the UN International Organization for Migration, Gauteng Department of Human Settlements, South African Depression and Anxiety Group, Childline and the UJ Faculty of Art Design and Architecture. In a classroom, she promotes critical thinking, interdisciplinary teaching, authentic learning approaches, and collaborative technologies. She presented numerous conference papers at local and international conferences and published articles in academic journals and book chapters. She has been an adjudicator for the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Silver Quill Awards (regional) and Golden Quill Awards (global). She is also an external examiner for other universities and article and chapter reviewer for national and international academic journals and publishers.

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CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY AND MAKING MEANING OF ORGANISATIONAL PURPOSE: A CASE STUDY OF SOUTH AFRICAN MEDICAL AID SERVICE PROVIDERS



The aim of the study was to explore how private medical aid service providers in South Africa engage their stakeholders in making meaning of their organisational purpose in response to corporate sustainability challenges in their environment. An extensive literature review was conducted in which relevant terminology, theoretical concepts, theories, models and overview of best practices were critically discussed against the contextual backdrop of global disruption. This global disrupted state saw people across the world traversing unknown territory while grappling with challenges such as the viability of sustainable development goals, the management of the pandemic fall-out and escalating climate change, and an increasing distrust in governments coupled with an increasing expectation by society that businesses should respond to broader societal challenges. As a result, corporate sustainability has become a key focus area on the corporate agenda and an important part of the business strategy, and this has also extended into the healthcare sector. The concept of corporate sustainability along with its three tenets, namely organisational purpose, creating shared-value (CSV) and environmental, social and governance (ESG), were critically discussed in the conceptual and theoretical framework of this study. This has given rise to a new paradigm of business where people are demanding more from businesses. Leading with a purpose is no longer a bonus but has become an expectation of businesses as social enterprises. Purpose has become the “North Star” that can tie a plethora of ESG programmes together in a clear and concise message.

The communication as constitutive of organisation (CCO) approach was regarded as the most suitable theoretical framework for the study given that, from an epistemological perspective, the concept of organisation was approached using a social systems lens. The CCO approach allows for mutual interaction and co-creation, while providing an example of how corporate sustainability can be constituted through communication. Emphasis was placed on the medical aid service provider as a manager of meaning – a curator – that not only constructs the message but curates the process to ensure that value resonates with the stakeholder and that meaning is created around the organisation’s purpose as corporate sustainability strategy.

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The study used an exploratory qualitative research design, and data collection was done by means of documentation analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews with executive management and communication strategists of the top private medical aid service providers in South Africa, as well as national and international experts in the fields of sustainability and branding. A total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with this purposive stratified sample of participants. The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) latent thematic analysis technique. Atlas.ti was used to code the data. This allowed for themes to emerge which were interpreted against the underlying theory and literature, offering further insights into the research problem and questions at hand.

The findings indicate that corporate sustainability in medical aid service providers is a dual concept that focuses on financial sustainability while also manifesting as a consciousness about the organisation's impact on society. The business operating model of the medical aid service provider has a major influence on how sustainability is currently managed and communicated. Reporting on ESG is high on the medical aid service providers' agenda, although this has not been integrated as part of their business strategy in all instances. In contrast, little engagement with CSV has been found among medical aid providers. Moreover, all medical aid service providers have adopted a purpose with/beyond profit approach, while some brands are still in their elementary stages, meaning that sustainability initiatives are approached within the ambit of corporate social investment.

This study makes an original contribution to the field of knowledge as it highlights how organisations can use an integrated sustainability framework as part of a business strategy and a pragmatic approach in communicating that strategy to their stakeholders through their business purpose. It also highlights that corporate sustainability needs collective and collaborative efforts from corporates who partner with each other, government and other entities to bring about social change. The study concludes with an integrated corporate sustainability framework depicting the organisation as a curator of meaning when engaging stakeholders at various levels of organisational functioning with regard to organisational purpose, aligned with culture, leadership and governance. For instance, guided by the CCO approach, the way in which organisational purpose is narrated among the internal and external stakeholders of medical aid service providers can have an inherent organising ability and become conducive to new ways of co-creating meaning around collective organisational responses to wickedly complex challenges facing society, such as sustainability.

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CLARISSA MUIR

Clarissa is currently a lecturer within the Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. She lectures both on undergraduate and postgraduate level in Strategic Communication and supervises postgraduate research studies. She has just completed a PhD study entitled: Corporate sustainability and making meaning of organisational purpose: A case study of South African medical aid service providers. Her current research continues into the fields of sustainability, organisational purpose and the creation of a Shared Value approach. She has presented her work at both national and international conferences.

Clarissa has been extensively involved in corporate training and workshop facilitation for some well-known brands in South Africa. For some of these brands it entailed programme development and accreditation by the Marketing Association of South Africa (MASA), resulting in individuals acquiring chartered marketer status.

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PROF NINA OVERTON-DE KLERK

Nina de Klerk is emeritus professor of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg, where she still supervises master's and PhD students. Currently, she is based in Cape Town where she manages the national master's programme for Vega School. Nina has an extensive academic and industry background in the field of communications spanning marketing, corporate and strategic communication, advertising, strategic branding and reputational development. She obtained her Ph.D in Communications in 1982 at the former Rand Afrikaans University (now the University of Johannesburg), was Head of the Department of Communications at this university from 1982 until 1992, Associate-Professor from 1984-1989 and Professor from 1989 until the end of 1994. During this period she was the editor of *Communicare*, accredited journal of communication sciences for approximately 10 years, conducted post-doctoral research on the effects of the electronic communication revolution at Columbia University, was a guest lecturer at UCLA (Sacramento) and a Distinguished Visiting Radcliffe Professor at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. She was also a participant in the United States South Africa Leadership Exchange Programme (USSALEP); an expert witness on the effects of media restrictions in South Africa at The Council on Foreign Relations in New York; and a member of the IDASA-sponsored delegation of women to meet with ANC women in Harare, Zimbabwe. From 1995-2005 she held the position of Executive Director of The Association for Communication and Advertising (ACA). [Read more....](#)

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THE ROLE OF ETHICS IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS



This paper examines the role of ethics in strategic communication and the challenges that organizations face in ensuring ethical practices. The study found that with the rise of digital media, strategic communication has become increasingly important for organisations to maintain a positive reputation and build trust with stakeholders. However, ethical considerations remain a challenge in this field. The study highlights that organisations must adopt a proactive approach to ethics in strategic communication, rather than simply reacting to ethical issues as they arise. The study identified several solutions to address ethical challenges, including implementing ethical codes of conduct, fostering a culture of transparency and accountability, and providing ethical training to employees. The study also found that prioritising ethical considerations in strategic communication can help organisations build trust with stakeholders and enhance their reputation in the long run. Overall, the study emphasises the importance of ethical considerations in strategic communication, as they are crucial to building and maintaining strong relationships with stakeholders. The findings suggest that organisations must prioritise ethics in their communication strategies to ensure long-term success.

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DR JUNIPER WONDER

Dr. Wonder Juniper is an accomplished academic and media professional with expertise in media studies, communication science, and public relations. With a diverse educational background, including a PhD in Media Studies, Dr. Juniper has demonstrated a strong commitment to academic pursuits and research. As a senior lecturer, Dr. Juniper brings extensive knowledge and experience to the classroom, fostering a dynamic learning environment for students. Additionally, Dr. Juniper's work as a radio presenter and producer at the South African Broadcasting Corporation showcases a deep understanding of the media industry and effective communication skills. With a successful track record in academia and broadcasting, Dr. Wonder Juniper is dedicated to advancing the field of media studies and making a positive impact in the academic and media communities.

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CRITERIA AND INDICATORS FOR ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION ON THE FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE OF A BUSINESS ORGANISATION



Introduction

Scholars emphasize the need for communication to be part of the strategic management of a business organization, yet the role of communication as a value creator for business organizations is not appreciated. This is because the impact created by strategic communication for a business organization is based on the traditional approach of using the results of a given communication activity, i.e. stakeholder reach, share of voice, the assessment of what stakeholders understood, heard, or responded to, and stakeholder engagement. However, the impact of the stakeholder relations managed by strategic communication on the financial performance of a business organization is rarely measured. According to Watson&Noble (2014); Zerfass&Viertmann (2017); Zerfass&Link (2023) the need to track communication activities to the financial impact is often neglected. This is due to the lack of specific criteria and indicators in the field of communication to justify the impact of strategic communication on the financial performance of a business organization.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to define and validate criteria and indicators to assess the impact of strategic communication in managing stakeholder relations on the financial performance of a business organization.

Literature review

Research examining the impact of communication has focused on explaining the impact on stakeholder attitudes and behavior (Likely&Watson, 2013; Volk, 2016). The standard metrics models proposed by researchers allow for exploring the interactions between communication activities, media, and channel outputs, changes in stakeholder knowledge, attitudes or behavior, and the impact on the organization, but it does not provide criteria and indicators that can be used to assess the financial impact created by the communication. Communication Value Circle (Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017) is the first framework developed in the field of communication that emphasizes the need to analyze the financial impact created by communication, but it is rarely applied in practice because the objectives of the communication, as called for in the model, are rarely aligned with the business strategic objectives. Aligning business and communication strategies has remained one of the biggest challenges in the field of communication for many years (European Communication Monitor series). Thus, there is a lack of criteria and indicators to assess the impact of strategic communication activities on the financial performance of a business organization without aligning business and communication objectives.

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CRITERIA AND INDICATORS FOR ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION ON THE FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE OF A BUSINESS ORGANISATION



Methodology

The qualitative research method chosen for the study is a Delphi group iterative interview: an expert semi-structured iterative interview with top-level communication professionals (managers) of business organizations. The study aims at agreeing and verifying with communication managers the criteria and indicators developed on a theoretical basis for assessing the impact of strategic communication-managed stakeholder relations on the financial performance of a business organization. The choice of this approach is based on the fact that no comprehensive framework of criteria and indicators has yet been developed to assess the impact of strategic communication-managed relationships on the financial performance of a business organization, while new developments are usually subject to disagreement and debate. They require expert consensus and agreement, as suggested by the Delphi research approach (Fink-Hafner, Dagen, Dousak, Novak & Hafner-Fink, 2019). A group of 20 top-level communication experts was formed to carry out this study.

Results

The Delphi study reached a consensus among experts on the wording of the key criteria descriptions, on a set of indicators and their derivatives, and on the ranking of the criteria and indicators in order of importance to assess the impact of the strategic communication managed stakeholder relations on the financial performance of the business organization.

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LINA JAKUČIONIENĖ

As a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Communication of Vilnius University, Lina Jakučionienė is researching the issues of the communication market, the changing requirements for a communication professional, and the value created by strategic communication in today's environment. Lina is a Lecturer at Vilnius University and a member of the Management Committee for the International Communication Master's Degree Study Programmes at Vilnius University.

Lina Jakučionienė has more than 20 years of experience in the communications field. Lina has been the Director of Corporate Communication at ERGO Insurance Group in the Baltic States. She has worked as the Head of the Public Relations Department of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania and as the CEO of „European Innovation Projects“. Lina also has work experience in the German Parliament and the European Parliament. Lina is the Ambassador of the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD) for Lithuania, she has served as the Chairwoman of the Lithuanian Communication Association.

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