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Social Media Recruitment 3.0
Toward a new paradigm of strategic recruitment communication

Helle Kryger Aggerholm and Sophie Esmann Andersen
Department of Management, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on a unique case of a Web 3.0 recruitment campaign, the purpose of this paper is to explore how a Web 3.0 social media recruitment communication strategy influence, add value to and challenge conventional recruitment communication management.

Design/methodology/approach – The study draws on a reflexive dialogical research approach, which means that it is methodologically designed as a critical dialogue between on the one hand an empirical case and on the other hand theories on social media and strategic communication.

Findings – The study points toward a fundamental new approach to recruitment communication. The application of a Web 3.0 strategy entails what we term an open source recruitment strategy and a redirection of employee focus from work life to private life. These insights point toward ontologically challenging the basic assumptions of employees, work life and the employing organization.

Research limitations/implications – The paper presents a single-case study, which prepares the ground for larger, longitudinal studies. Such studies may apply a more long-term focus on the implications of applying Web 3.0 recruitment strategies and how they may be integrated into – or how they challenge – overall corporate communication strategies.

Practical implications – A turn toward Web 3.0 in recruitment communication affects the degree of interactional complexity and the level of managerial control. Furthermore, the authors argue that the utilization of a Web 3.0 strategy in recruitment communication put forth precarious dilemmas and challenges of controllability, controversy, ownership and power relations, demanding organizations to cautiously entering the social media 3.0 employment market.

Originality/value – This study indicates how the value and potentials of social media as facilitating participatory processes and community conversations can be strategically used in and fundamentally alter what strategic social media recruitment is, can and do.

Keywords Social media, Strategic communication, Communication management, Communication strategy, Employee communication, Campaigns

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The uses of social technologies and digital media (i.e. blogs, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, etc.) were initially introduced and creatively used within marketing and brand communications (Fournier and Avery, 2011; Hanna et al., 2011). Currently, we are witnessing an increased awareness of and focus on the strategic potentials in adopting social media in employee communication processes, e.g. in recruitment and selection (Nikolaou, 2014), as mean to knowledge sharing (Gibbs et al., 2013) and employee engagement (Rai, 2012).

Surveys indicate that companies increasingly turn to social media as a preferred recruitment source (e.g. Brotherton, 2012). HR professionals increasingly and extensively use social networking sites to screen and select applicants (Nikolaou, 2014; Smith and Kidder, 2010), e.g. in order to verify information provided by the applicants (Levashina, 2009).
or merely because of the social media accessibility to applicant information to a low cost (Jacobs, 2009). However, in a study on the perceived fairness of using social media for screening applicants in the hospital industry, results show that applicants generally rated the use of social networking sites as less fair which would ultimately affect their job intentions negatively (Madera, 2012). In addition, the study suggested that applicants perceived social networking sites as not providing any information relevant for either new or current employees. The study by Nikolaou (2014) supports this, as it shows a mismatch between job seekers' social media use and the recruiting companies. The results indicate that whereas companies increasingly turn to social networking sites in posting jobs, job seekers are using specific job boards more extensively and, in addition, consider them more effective than both LinkedIn and Facebook. The same study shows that social networking sites are effective in reaching passive job seekers compared to online job boards.

From a recruitment perspective, social media are also used as part of a corporate communication strategy to promote employer brand image (Sivertsen et al., 2013; Carrillat et al., 2014) and studies show that a favorable brand image positively affects recruitment outcome (e.g. DelVecchio et al., 2007). A study by Allen et al. (2004) on whether and how the media used to communicate recruitment messages influence outcome concludes that the employed media strategy affects both cognitive and affective responses to the message as well as pre-hire outcome (including attitudes, intentions and behavior associated with joining the organization). The mere social media presence, thus, seems to positively affect corporate reputation, which again positively affect employer attractiveness, and which positively correlates with applicants' job intentions and their expectations toward the employment company (Sivertsen et al., 2013; Carrillat et al., 2014). Consequently, social media seem to make a difference in recruitment contexts and may positively affect recruitment processes and outcome.

Additionally, in a case study of a social media recruitment campaign, Henderson and Bowley (2010) have explored how organizations can build authentic dialogue and stakeholder “friendships” through social networking sites. The core idea of the campaign studied by Henderson and Bowley (2010) was to reposition the industry image and portray the industry as a “cool” career option by means of creating authentic dialogue and friendships between existing and potential employees, thus increase identification between the organization and potential job applicants and to develop a sense of shared community. However, the authors conclude that since the organization behind the campaign adopted a taken-for-granted assumption about social media and the use of social media as automatically developing relations and generating authentic conversation, the campaign failed to strategically utilize the social aspects of social media.

Accordingly, the question is not if social media are used as recruitment tools but rather how social media and online technologies are applied strategically in recruitment campaigns, and there seems to be a need for further knowledge on how to use this new tool optimally. Based on the review above, the paper proposes that the current predominant use of social media in recruitment context is driven by three overall assumptions:

1. social media are first and foremost a channel to broader reach in recruitment processes;
2. social media are manageable and controllable; and
3. social media presence automatically gives rise to co-operative practice and fosters collaborative engagement.

In this paper, we use the in-game recruitment campaign entitled “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” as an exemplary case to discuss the shortcomings of the above-listed assumptions and suggest a paradigmatic shift in the use of social media in job recruitment communication, which breaks with the predominant assumptions guiding the current
Accordingly, the paper aims to explore the characteristics and nature of this new emerging recruitment communication practice and show how it fundamentally challenges previous assumptions on employee, organization, and work life. However, the use of social media in recruitment communication is not entirely unproblematic, and hence the analysis also points toward some of the critiques and challenges emerging as employment relations transcend the conventional employee-employer relationship and includes private spheres, value identification and identify performance. These pitfalls are pivotal for managers to keep in mind before embarking on the wonders of the recruitment communication practices.

The paper is structured as follows: in order to make a qualified discussion of social media practices, the first part theoretically outlines different approaches to social media by suggesting different notions of “sociality” in social media. Drawing on Fuchs et al. (2010), we outline three fundamentally different approaches to and usages of social media (Web 1.0, Web 2.0 and Web 3.0) and argue, by means of comparing this social media framework with the guiding assumptions derived from the introductory literature review, that the predominant use of social media in recruitment communication not only fails to utilize the strategic potentials and values derived from a Web 3.0 strategy, but also seems to have created blind spots toward the challenges that follows such recruitment strategy whether assumed or actually applied. On that note, we are able to formulate the research question of the study:

*RQ1.* How does a Web 3.0 social media recruitment communication strategy influence, add value to and challenge conventional recruitment communication management?

In the second part, we introduce to the methodological considerations. Applying a research strategy of dialogical reflexivity (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007, 2011), the research process is designed as a reflexive dialogue between on the one hand existing theories and on the other hand an empirical case, which continuously challenges the theories and push forward new avenues to pursue theoretically. Thus, the third section, which includes case description and analysis, consists of a dialogical interplay and discussion between case and theory as means to illustrate how the case challenges existing and renders new theoretical insights possible.

The fourth section includes a concluding discussion and suggests how the value and potentials of social media as facilitating participatory processes and community conversations can be strategically used and how it fundamentally alters current recruitment communication and challenges recruitment communication management. The study, thus, offers new insights into a paradigmatically new way of understanding what strategic social media recruitment is, can and do. The paper is rounded up with a critical discussion of implications for research and practice.

**Social media and strategic recruitment communication**

Social media is increasingly acknowledged as part of the field of strategic communication, namely, their contribution to the fulfillment of an organization’s mission (Hallahan et al., 2007) and is widely adopted within a variety of practice disciplines, including marketing and brand communication (Hanna et al., 2011), investor and financial communication (Koehler, 2014), political communication (Macnamara, 2012), public relations (Kent, 2013), crisis communication (Schultz et al., 2011), CSR communication (Kesavan et al., 2013) and organizational communication (Huang et al., 2013). Research generally emphasizes how the usage of social media in strategic communication adds value to organizations as it enables corporations to accomplish citizenry collaboration and transparency and thus to perform democratic ideals in both corporate and governmental contexts.
(Avery and Graham, 2013; Kent, 2013), to facilitate stakeholder dialogues (Koehler, 2014), to empower consumers (Füller et al., 2010) and to facilitate co-creation and participatory processes (Novani and Kyoichi, 2012).

However, the notion of social media adoption in strategic communication seems to rest on an underlying assumption of social media being social per se and collaborative and transformative by nature (Grunig, 2009). By virtue of its social presence, social media connect people, create democratic processes and collaborative innovations – and ultimately corporate value. However, as argued by Fuchs et al. (2010), social media encompass different forms of sociality, which manifest as three social media modes with respect to a distinction of different social media qualities: a tool for thought (Web 1.0), a medium for human communication (Web 2.0) and networked digital technologies that support human co-operation (Web 3.0). The distinction builds on the idea of knowledge as a threefold process encompassing elements of cognition, communication and co-operation, realizing that “all communication processes require cognition, but not all cognition processes result in communication, and that all co-operation processes require communication and cognition, but not all cognition and communication processes result in co-operation” (Fuchs et al., 2010, p. 43). Consequently, the authors argue that a Web 3.0 strategy is the ultimate and most efficient utilization of the qualities of social media. The three different approaches to social media will naturally manifest in different communication strategies and tactics, as they promote various goals and objectives. Therefore, the distinctions can serve as a fruitful frame for understanding and systematizing current organizational use of social media in strategic recruitment communication.

In order to distinguish between the different approaches to the notion of “sociality” in social media, i.e. understanding of what makes social media social, Fuchs et al. (2010) draw on classical social theories and define “sociality” from within a Durkheimian, Weberian and Tönniesien perspective.

The Durkheimian, or structure-based view on sociality defines social media as fixed and objectified social structures, imposed upon humans, which form and guide actions and behaviors. Applied to a recruitment communication contexts, the rationale of a structure-based use of social media is that organizations must be present where (potential) employees are, and thus, social media represent a basic term for navigating within the social world and therefore include no strategic considerations.

The Weberian, or action-based view on sociality draws on the categories of social actions and relations, suggesting that in order to be considered a social relation, meaningful symbolic interaction – i.e. communication – must take place between involved actors. Weber states, that “not every type of contact of human beings has a social character; this is rather confined to cases where the actor’s behaviour is meaningfully oriented to that of others” (Weber, in Fuchs et al., 2010, p. 45). In other words, sociality is defined in terms of interaction and communication, and social media technologies are defined by means of their ability to support communication processes between relevant people and content. Applied to a recruitment communication context, the rationale of an action-based use of social media is that organizations are able to reach potential applicants across time and space and potentially build relationships and positive brand reputation through dialogue and communication of (employer) brand values.

Social media presence may create a positive employer brand image and expand the potential pool of job applicants (e.g. Carrillat et al., 2014). However, social media are not social per se and do not automatically create candidate engagement and collaborative relationship as the case study by Henderson and Bowley (2010) also suggests. According to Fuchs et al. (2010), the Tönniesian, or co-operation-based view on sociality draws on the
notion of “sociality as community,” hence the feeling of togetherness, values and shared meanings. Thus, social media is valuable insofar as it “enables the social networking of humans, brings people together and mediates feelings of virtual togetherness” (p. 49). Though potentially carrying strong strategic values, such communities and feelings of togetherness do not automatically emerge in recruitment contexts. Rather, it requires strategic efforts to utilize the community values and potentials of social media. Fuchs et al. (2010) argue “that the turn towards Web 3.0-technologies that foster co-operation should not only remain a technological turn, as for example the Semantic Web or wikis, but needs to be accompanied by a transformation towards a fully co-operative society” (p. 57). The quote highlights that a fully utilization of the Web 3.0 qualities and characteristics assumes fundamental corporate changes and an alternative understanding of how power is distributed and strategic value is created (cf. Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012).

Comparing the social media framework provided by Fuchs et al. (2010) with the guiding assumptions derived from the introductory literature review, we argue that the predominant use of social media in recruitment communication is characterized by a structural and communicative utilization of social media, while at the same time assuming the values of a Web 3.0 strategy. We therefore argue, that current practice fails to utilize the strategic potentials and values derived from a fully integrated co-operative use of social media, and current practice seems to have created blind spots toward the challenges that follows a Web 3.0 recruitment strategy whether assumed or actually applied. Following this, we propose the following research question:

RQ1. How does a Web 3.0 social media recruitment communication strategy influence, add value to and challenge conventional recruitment communication management?

Methodology
The paper argues that the in-game recruitment campaign entitled “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” represents a unique example of a Web 3.0 in-game job recruitment campaign, as it breaks with the predominant assumptions guiding the current use of social media in strategic recruitment communication as outlined above. Hence, it provides the opportunity to explore and discuss how a Web 3.0 social media recruitment communication strategy influences, adds value to and challenges the existing strategic recruitment communication practices in general and recruitment communication management in particular.

Methodologically, the study of the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case applies a strategy of dialogical reflexivity (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007, 2011). Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) view “empirical material as a resource for developing theoretical ideas through the active mobilization and problematization of existing frameworks” (p. 4). In other words, they argue that theory development is produced “through recognizing the fusion of theory and empirical material in the research construction process” (pp. 3-4), thus, dissolving the classic methodological polarization between inductive and deductive research designs. The notion of induction and deduction builds upon a clear separation of theory and empirical material in the research process. Given our reflexive dialogical methodology, the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case is not used to verify or test existing theory or to provide a “thick description,” but to illustrate new theoretical issues and challenges through empirical material (Stake, 2005; Thomas, 2011). Berg (2009) introduces the notion of a spiral research approach, arguing that the research process is continuously pushed forward in the interplay between empirical material and existing theoretical constructs as new questions keeps arising as a result of the interplay. Consequently, the role of the empirical material in reflexive methodologies is to “challenge, rethink and illustrate theory” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011, p. 4). Accordingly, the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case is chosen purposively as it offers important learning points (Stake, 2005) when it comes to challenging...
and broadening our theoretical knowledge of social media recruitment communication.

In other words, we argue that the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case challenges predominant theoretical assumptions on the use of social media in recruitment communication.

The empirical material consists of a two-minute long digital case presentation provided by the recruiting company (available on YouTube) as well as user comments on YouTube[1]. The case study is methodologically designed as a critical dialogue between on the one hand the empirical case and on the other hand theories on social media and strategic recruitment communication. As the case continuously challenges the conventional understandings of how online media and social technologies are approached and utilized in the recruitment of new employees, new exploratory questions continue to arise, offering new insight into understanding the characteristics and strategic potentials in adopting a Web 3.0, which thus not only understands social media as a new medium by employing its structural and communicative characteristics, but also incorporates the co-operational dimensions of social media. Subsequently, the paper discusses the strategic challenges as well as ethical concerns in adopting a Web 3.0 strategy in recruitment contexts.

“CODEWARRIOR WANTED”: a Web 3.0 recruitment communication campaign

In 2011, Uncle Grey, a Danish division of the worldwide advertising agency Grey, introduced a new, creative approach to social media recruitment, as it turned to online social gaming and merged itself into the gaming community to recruit a front-end developer. Having had no luck in job advertisement via traditional media channels (newspapers, job boards and industry websites), the agency had to rethink its recruitment strategy. An analysis of the ideal potential employee touch points revealed a high affinity toward online gaming, and consequently the agency moved their recruitment campaign into the digital space (Plate 1).

To ensure that their recruitment message would fit unobtrusively in the digital gaming environment, Uncle Grey teamed up with the most popular Team Fortress 2 players to serve as ambassadors for the Uncle employer brand by adding Uncle.dk/developer to their avatar profile name (Plates 2 and 3).

Like a peer referral, players added “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” posters within the game to promote the job and recommend players to apply for the job. The posters provided a direct link to apply for the job (Plate 4).

Within the first week of the campaign, Uncle Grey received more than 50 qualified applications and ultimately hired a highly qualified and experienced front-end developer as a result of the campaign.

From traditional HRM to open source recruitment strategy

Social media are often used as a key element in viral marketing strategies or so-called word of mouth/mouse strategies (Grifoni et al., 2013) to spread corporate and brand messages among relevant stakeholders (e.g. Kesavan et al., 2013). In marketing communications, such strategies are driven by the selection of loyal customers – or fans – to act as brand ambassadors to spread and circulate brand narratives among peers (e.g. Hanna et al., 2011). Similarly, in an HR context, Henderson and Bowley (2010) describe how an organization initiates employee spokespersons – or ambassadors – to enter into dialogue with potential candidates on a selected social networking site as an integrated part of its recruitment strategy in order for them to experience the organizational culture and values through current employees, hence creating an authentic relationship and organizational identification. Thus, current employees are used strategically as culture bearers and company representatives.
However, the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case takes on a different approach as the company “outsources” its voice and values to be represented beyond organizational employment. As a result, the company and its cultural values are not constituted by means of its current employees; rather the company represents and manifests itself through
peripheral external actors by merging itself into relevant markets and circulating conversations. Consequently, the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case performs what is suggested to be termed an open source recruitment strategy, i.e. a recruitment strategy, where strategic decisions on recruitment are made in collaboration with the total brand ecosystem, beyond HR and marketing departmental walls and organizational barriers. Fournier and Avery (2011) introduce the idea of open source brand management, arguing that whereas traditional branding rests upon the notion of differentiation, i.e. claiming and occupying a market position different from those of its competitors through unique value propositions, branding in open source contexts is about creating resonant cultural conversation. This idea seems transferrable to a recruitment and employment context when

**Plate 3.** Screen dump from Team Fortress 2: a player has added a URL of the employment company website (“Uncle.dk/Developer”) followed by his game name tag (“Stoffer”)

**Plate 4.** Screen dump from Team Fortress 2 with direct link to applying for the job
looking at the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case. In addition, several researchers argue that the notion of empowerment and brand co-creation not only adhere to consumers, but to stakeholders in general (Hatch and Schultz, 2010) and employees in particular (e.g. Aggerholm et al., 2011).

Hence, we argue, that the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case provides an example of the creation of cultural resonance in recruitment communication as it seamlessly integrates the recruitment message into an existing online community culture of passionate gamers; a culture which the company aims to create organizational affinity toward, thus ultimately becoming the natural choice of employer for community members. The case seeks to tap into naturally occurring social conversations among potential employees, hence (potentially) creating organizational identification through cultural and community resonance.

From work life to social life
The performance of an open source recruitment strategy suggests a broader perception of the organizational boundaries in that such a strategy inherently turns the organization into a brand ecosystem (Bergvall, 2006) where internal and external stakeholders converge. Plate 5 illustrates how stakeholders converge in the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case, as the Team Fortress 2 avatar discursively articulate himself as part of the organization with the use of the pronoun “we” (“we are looking for a front-end developer” – our italic), though not actually employed by the company in a traditional sense.

As the organization expands its organizational boarders, it becomes increasingly difficult to make a clear distinction between the organization and its surroundings; between the corporate world and society; between work life and private life. Consequently, with the performance of an open source recruitment strategy, the value creation activities occur within the (employment) market, detached from the organization, and, organizational values are performed and enacted in community relations in non-corporate settings. The “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case thus builds upon a strategy where organizational identification and professional sympathy with the organization is created beyond organizational boarders; detached from the organizational culture. Or it could be suggested that the notion of organizational culture is enacted beyond traditional organizational membership. Hence, authentic dialogues and relationship building between current employees and potential applicants is not what is assumed to create organizational
identification (as with the case provided by Henderson and Bowley, 2010). Rather, the gaming community in general and the assigned Team Fortress 2 players create a link between the job seekers and the Uncle Grey brand, which renders new forms of organizational identification possible. In other words, we argue that organizational identification is potentially created because the potential job candidate identifies with the community and its members and not the corporate culture and values as such. The Uncle Grey brand broadens the notion of organizational culture by merging itself into an alternative cultural setting. Consequently, the creation of employment values is detached from the organization and created by means of this alternative culture through existing social relations and conversations between the Team Fortress 2 gamers. Accordingly, the employing organization do not enter into recruitment conversations with potential applicants; rather the organization approaches (using key Team Fortress 2 gamers as extended organizational members or recruitment ambassadors) the job seekers as they are in the midst of performing a private, non-work-related role.

Aggerholm et al. (2011) suggest that one of the most important concerns for employer branding in sustainable organizations is to understand, interact with and address employees as whole human beings and not simply as strategic resources acting as channels to markets and defined by means of their embodiment of corporate values. Along this line of thinking, Bourne et al. (2009) rearticulate the employee as human beings with moral, values and opinions beyond the employee identity. From a recruitment perspective, and as the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case illustrates, such reconceptualization of the employee redirects the communicative focus. Whereas traditional recruitment messages seek to convey job descriptions and communicate corporate values to potential job candidates, the case suggests an alternative path to communicate realistic job previews through insights into the social and private life of the potential employees as human beings: who are they, what do they do in everyday life, what are their passions and interests? Not as employees and hardworking laborers but as human beings.

These insights manifest themselves in the strategic social media choices as a corporate presence where the potential candidate performs his social identity. Such presence carries certain employment expectations. Thus, a strategic utilization of social media is not a mere creative broadening of media channels possibilities, but carries significant meaning and value in itself, influencing the nature of and expectations toward the unwritten, mutual psychological contract that operates the exchange relationship between both parties and form the basis for every term of employment (Rousseau, 1989). As an alternative to the more traditional transactional and relational psychological contracts, Thompson and Bunderson (2003) introduce the concept of an ideological psychological contract, which is constituted by the notion of the organization as one that is committed to and invests in a certain value-based cause, or advocates certain ideological principles. The “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case can be seen as a way of carrying such ideological and value-based expectations to the job through its social media strategy. As a strategic choice, the in-game presence as means to search for new employees suggests a well-balanced employment relation, where the employee will have the time and energy to pursue and outlive private passions. In other words, the strategy sets up an expectation of a balanced relation between work life and private life and thus invites the employee into the organization as a whole human being and not a mere strategic resource and corporate asset.

Reciprocally, the in-game recruitment strategy implies an expectation toward the potential employee to invest himself as a whole human being and not merely his professional competencies. However, different studies suggest, that such focus on embracing the whole human being in the employment relation does not come without critiques. In a study by Land and Taylor (2011) on corporate and managerial interventions in private and leisure lives, the authors introduce to the company Ethico, branded as an
environmentalist and value driven company with an authentic bottom-up culture, where employees live the brand and “managerial discourses suggest that work and life should be balanced by making “work” a place where you can really be yourself” (p. 36). As part of an incentive system, the Ethico company introduced a “too nice to work day” voucher system, which rewarded exceptional performance (i.e. employees working especially hard during sales or Christmas) with a voucher for a day off over and above the standard annual leave entitlement. Still, the authors observe that many employees have several vouchers in stock, which could suggest that in reality employees had not found a valid reason to take a day off or had not been able to negotiate the time away (p. 49). Interestingly, the authors further observe a blog entry from an employee who had cashed in a “too nice to work” voucher to go sea kayaking, which was seemingly validated by means of writing a blog entry. Thus, the employee may not have been at her desk, however, her activities did contribute to reinforcing the brand value. The authors provocatively reflect: “what would happen if an employee took a day off to lie in bed, smoke, masturbate, watch day-time TV, or organize a trade union branch” (p. 49), implying that the notion of embracing the whole individual is a balance between employee emancipation and corporate control of employee’s lives in accordance with brand values.

The case thus points toward some of the critiques and challenges emerging as employment relations transcend the conventional employee-employer relationship and includes private spheres, value identification and identify performance. And the case points towards the importance of employer and employee to enter into an open dialogue to match their respective expectation toward the employment relationship. Such employment dialogues have always been crucial, however, the introduction of social media reinforces their importance. Since the usage of social media is not just a questions of channel selection and market reach, but carries with it fundamental reassessments about employees, work life and organizations.

Concluding discussion: toward a Web 3.0 social media recruitment strategy
In this paper, we draw on the social media vocabulary of Fuchs et al. (2010), who argue that social media encompasses different modes of and approaches to sociality. On that notion, they distinguish between Web 1.0, Web 2.0 and Web 3.0, reflecting a development toward a broader and more extensive understanding of the concept of sociality, ranging from social media as means of cognition, to social media as modes of communication and finally to social media as co-operation, articulating social media as facilitating community relations and establishing a sense of shared community among its members.

As a basic strategy and drawing on a Web 1.0 approach, the paper argues that the CODEWARRIOR WANTED case illustrates and acknowledges new means to distribute recruitment messages and consequently new ways of reaching potential employees. In line with this, the case illustrates how digital media and social technologies represent a new channel in the recruitment communication mix. From a Web 2.0 approach, the usage of social media enables the employer to reach potential employees and subsequently create basic forms of meaningful interaction. It can be argued that the case not only demonstrates the establishment of communication between the organization and the individual job candidate, but also facilitates meaningful interaction and dialogue between human beings, thus offering an ontologically new way of understanding what recruitment communication is and is capable of.

The “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case study also illustrates a paradigmatic shift toward a Web 3.0 (Fuchs et al., 2010) within recruitment communication, which can be summarized into the following four determining and interrelated characteristics:

- the focus on job competencies as part of a personal and private passion breaks down the conceptual line between an employee and a human being;
the focus on the potential employee outside employment related contexts breaks down the distinction between work hours and social life;

• the focus on employment messages merged into private and social online communities breaks down the boundaries between the organization and its surroundings; and

• the focus on the values and relations of an online (gaming) community breaks down the notion of employees as individuals and reinstall the employees as networked and social human beings.

Fuchs et al. (2010) argue that a turn toward Web 3.0 ontologically changes the understanding of human actions and relations, and assumes fundamental corporate changes as well as an alternative understanding of how power is distributed and value is created. Drawing on the above, we suggest that a social media 3.0 recruitment strategy thus breaks with fundamental notions of employees (as the notion of employees as individuals are rearticulated into networked and social human being), of work life (as the distinction between work hours and social life is dissolved) and of the employing organization (as the boundaries between the organization and its surroundings are broken down).

In the following, we discuss how a Web 3.0 social media recruitment campaign such as the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case fundamentally influences and challenges traditional recruitment communication strategy and practice.

From organizational control to communicative complexity

Introducing social technologies and digital media in strategic recruitment communication adds considerable complexity to the planning processes and execution of recruitment communication. On the one side, when organizations begin to understand potential applicants beyond representing a homogenous group of raw brainpower towards being whole, human beings living heterogeneous lives and performing non-work-related identities, the pool of applicants becomes more diffuse and blurred, hence the communication network becomes more complex. On the other side, entering into dialogue with such complex communication network also decreases complexity in terms of vagueness and diffusiveness (Nothhaft and Wehmeier, 2007) as the understanding of applicants’ stakes, interests and life worlds become more accurate. At first glance, from the inside constraints of the organizational walls, the pool of applicants might seem as a diffuse, impenetrable collective entity, however, through interaction and co-operation facilitated by use of Web 3.0 technology, the pool of applicants come to appear a nuanced system of subsystems and actors with coalitions and interest (of which the Team Fortress 2 community is just one of these systems).

From a sociocybernetic viewpoint as formulated by Nothhaft and Wehmeier (2007), “persuasion” of (potential) employees has its limits in the complex world of Web 3.0. The idea of controllable persuasion might work in clearly delimited, manageable groups under the authority of the HR manager; however, it is challenged in an inherently co-operation based, pluralistic and complex social network as the Team Fortress 2 community. Within such networks it is impossible to control social and cultural phenomena such as the employer brand or company reputation (Nothhaft and Wehmeier, 2007).

In addition, it is not the (HR) employees, who act as “ambassadors” but third persons with no direct organizational attachments, obligations or psychological contracts, which adds even further to the authenticity and credibility of the communication, but also implies a redoubtable lack of communicative control. It is of course possible to take precautionary, monitoring measures with regard to the “life” of the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” poster within the game, however, the entire purpose with and flow of communication mediating...
feelings of virtual togetherness (Fuchs et al., 2010) would be short-circuited if the organization interfered in the interactions and co-operation characteristic of a fully co-operative Web 3.0 society.

From creative execution to ethical balancing

As the traditional boundaries between an organization and its surroundings are broken down when applying a Web 3.0 social media strategy in recruitment, the recruitment messages of the organization unconsentingly invade the private sphere of (potential) applicants without the knowledge and consent of the involved actors, which give rise to ethical concerns. Martin and Smith (2008) discuss the notion of stealth marketing, defined as “the surreptitious marketing practice that fail to disclose or reveal the true relationship with the company that produces or sponsors the marketing messages” (2008, p. 45). Stealth – or covert – marketing thus means that the intention of the message or sender’s identity is not openly displayed and states as premise that word of mouth/mouse is an effective promotion tool and that peer group recommendation is an ultimate marketing weapon (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004). It can therefore be difficult to distinguish between creatively sophisticated marketing executions and ethically challenging activities.

Martin and Smith (2008) analyze three cases of stealth marketing based on the concepts of deception (e.g. whether it fails to disclose the commercial or corporate affiliation of the message), intrusion (e.g. whether it violates the privacy of the involved actors) and exploitation (e.g. whether it exploits the goodness of mankind). The analysis shows that from a non-consequentialist ethical perspective, there may be positive intentions related to the use of stealth marketing, including sharing knowledge on useful information about product or services, and entertainment. However, from a consequentialist ethical perspective, all consequences of the action must be taken into consideration, including the potential creation of denigration of the brand and a heightened distrust in business in general (Martin and Smith, 2008, p. 48). The authors also point toward a more far-reaching and socially harmful consequence as stealth marketing may potentially create inauthenticity among and ultimately distrust in human relationships as a consequence of the increasingly widespread commercialization of human interaction.

Consequently, it seems relevant to ask whether the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case is an example of what one might term stealth recruitment? On the one hand, it can be argued that the recruitment messages and posters appearing in the game do not try to cover their corporate agenda – on the contrary, the messages rest on the ability of the potential job candidate/player actually being able to identify the employment company and thus ultimately apply for a job. In order to reach communication objectives, the message must necessarily be decoded as a recruitment message. However, when browsing through user comments on the case on YouTube, several comments suggesting skepticism toward the placement of recruitment messages in the game can be found (see Box 1).

Box 1. Selection of negative user comments and responses to the “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case presentation on YouTube

“WTF is this shit. I am being marketed to in games by other companies? Looks like I will have to put my posters up covering theirs”
“fuck this shit, i DONT WANT fucking ads on my tf!”
“This is actually a pretty neat one-off thing, but i hope it doesn’t become standard for shooters to get plastered with ads of any kinds, even ones made by skilled players”
“I will cover these ads with my own spray to the best of my ability if and when I see them”
In addition, Grimes (2013) suggests a general trend toward a commercialization of digital gaming, most prominently including product placements and in-game advertisement. The “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case indicates that the commercialization also includes other corporate messages, e.g. recruitment messages. The gamers strongly react to the messages and the comments (see Box 1) point toward a feeling of intrusion and exploitation among the users. At best, the stealth recruitment messages create distrust and skepticism toward the (employer) brand and recruiting company, resulting in users covering the corporate messages (as the comments suggest). However, in worst case, the commercialization creates a general distrust between the users and thus potentially violates the very essence of the online gaming worlds, i.e. the strong sense of community. Consequently, what creates value for a Web 3.0 social media recruitment strategy is what ultimately may also be destroyed by the strategy. Accordingly, we can conclude that from a strategic communication perspective, a turn toward Web 3.0 in recruitment communication affects the degree of interactional complexity and the level of managerial control. Hence, we conclude that the utilization of a Web 3.0 strategy in recruitment communication put forth precarious dilemmas and challenges of controllability, controversy, ownership and power relations, demanding organizations to cautiously entering the social media 3.0 employment market.

Naturally, this paper has its limitations since the above conclusions are drawn on the basis of a single-case study, and as such we only offer a limited contribution to the initial understandings of how a Web 3.0 social media recruitment communication strategy influences, adds value to and challenges traditional strategic recruitment communication management. Hence, the conclusions may as such call upon a need for larger, longitudinal case studies, including studies on the long-term implications of applying Web 3.0 recruitment strategies and their integration with or challenges of overall corporate communication strategies. Such studies on the long-term strategic values and implications will contribute to pushing the boundaries and traditional assumptions in terms of how social media can be used strategically in relation to value creation and facilitation of truly participatory processes and community conversations.

Note
1. The “CODEWARRIOR WANTED” case and pictures are used and reprinted by kind permission of Lars Samuelsen, Chief Strategy Officer & Head of Digital, Uncle Grey, Aarhus, Denmark. An agency prepared case presentation can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTAdGBg1TvY.

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Further reading

Corresponding author
Sophie Esmann Andersen can be contacted at: sea@mgmt.au.dk

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Crafting employee trust: from authenticity, transparency to engagement

Hua Jiang
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, USA, and
Yi Luo
Communication Studies, Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey, USA

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to propose and test a model examining how three influential organizational factors – authentic leadership, transparent organizational communication, and employee engagement – are linked to employee trust.

Design/methodology/approach – This study conducted an online survey on a random sample of 391 employees across different industry sectors in the USA.

Findings – Authentic leadership, transparent organizational communication, and employee engagement directly and significantly influenced the level of trust that employees have toward their organizations. Authentic leadership indirectly impacted employee engagement through transparent organizational communication. Authentic leadership also indirectly affected employee trust via the presence of transparent organizational communication and employee engagement.

Practical implications – The study informs communication managers and organizational leaders with the importance of integrating authentic leadership and transparent communication skills, strategies, and tactics in various training and mentoring workshops. Creating a motivating, nurturing, and transparent organizational environment contributes to employee engagement and trust.

Originality/value – This study examines the drivers of employee trust by testing the effects of employee engagement, authentic leadership, and transparent organizational communication.

Keywords Leadership, Trust, Employee engagement, Organizational communication

Introduction
Research has consistently linked high levels of employee trust with positive variables at the organizational level, such as employees’ enhanced work performance (Brown et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2010), job satisfaction (Goris et al., 2003; Yang, 2014), organizational citizenship behavior (Duffy and Lilly, 2013; Liu et al., 2013), and employee engagement (Buckley, 2011; Liu, 2009). Prior literature suggests that various factors may contribute to the level of trust that employees have with their organizations, including supervisors’/managers’ leadership behaviors (Men, 2014, 2015; Men and Stacks, 2014), organizational communication (Mishra et al., 2014), and employee engagement (Saks, 2006). This study examines the way employee trust relates to several key organizational contextual factors: immediate supervisors’ authentic leadership behaviors, transparent organizational communication, and employee engagement. The findings will contribute to the growing body of literature on trust, leadership, and employee communication. They will also provide actionable insights for communications professionals and executives on how to develop employee trust by upholding the values of authenticity, transparency, and engagement.

In the present study, the authors hypothesize positive relationships among authentic leadership, transparent organizational communication, employee engagement, and employee trust, derived from several underlying theories. First of all, drawing upon employee voice theory, the authors propose that authentic leaders can strengthen the level of employee engagement in their organizations (Besieux et al., 2015). Cutting across the
various conceptualizations of employee voice lies in the theme that employees desire to have a say in decision making, problem solving, and other work-related activities (Dundon et al., 2004). When employees are informed, given an opportunity to voice their concerns, deliver input, and exert influence on the way their organization operates, their level of engagement increases (Albrecht, 2010; Wilkinson and Fay, 2011). In alignment with this line of thought, the authors argue that the behavioral dimensions of managers’ authentic leadership facilitate employee voice, and therefore, enhance employee engagement (Besieux et al., 2015). That is, authentic leaders understand their own strengths and weaknesses and actively involve themselves in close interactions with their subordinates (i.e., self-awareness), cultivate trust among their subordinates through disclosing themselves and sharing information (i.e., relational transparency), integrate employees’ viewpoints and all relevant information in making decisions (i.e., balanced information processing), and incorporate a positive moral perspective that guides their leadership behaviors, such as honesty, fairness, and accountability (i.e., internalized moral perspective) (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Yukl, 2006). Thus, the positive relationship between authentic leadership and engagement can be accounted for through the increase of employee voice.

Second, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model provides an overarching theoretical framework to comprehend the positive interrelationship among managers’ authentic leadership behaviors, transparent organizational communication, and employee engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Besieux et al., 2015). The JD-R model posits that job demands that employees receive from their organizations affect their engagement (Menguc et al., 2013). Physical, psychological, social, and organizational characteristics of any job lead to certain physical and psychological job demands that employees are expected to satisfy, and job resources that can lessen the negative impact of those job demands develop employees’ knowledge, skills, and abilities, promote personal growth and development, and reinforce the accomplishment of work goals (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli et al., 2009). Against the rationale of the JD-R model, the role of authentic leaders and transparent organizational communication becomes apparent in enriching employees’ job resources (Besieux et al., 2015). Authenticity in managers’ leadership behaviors facilitates transparency in organizational communication (Rawlins, 2009; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Transparent communication could tap into the antecedents of employee engagement by encouraging employees’ active participation in information acquisition and distribution (i.e., participation), reinforcing truth, substantiality, and completeness in information exchange (i.e., substantiality), and reporting an organization’s legally releasable activities and policies in an accountable manner (i.e., accountability) (Besieux et al., 2015; Cotterrell, 2000; Hong et al., 2013; Martinson, 1996; Stirton and Lodge, 2001). As a consequence, employees are more likely to demonstrate positive affect toward their organizations and feel empowered when receiving those functional socioemotional resources from their organizations (Menguc et al., 2013; Saks, 2006).

Finally, the social exchange theory (SET) emphasizes a process of exchange between relationship parties, a process resting upon mutual dependency, compensation, and reciprocity (Blau, 1964). When employees highly value the organizational resources that they receive (in the present study, authenticity and transparency promoted positive emotional state as positive affect, and empowerment), they may choose to reciprocate positively and feel confident that their organizations are fair and just (i.e., integrity). Naturally, they will do what they say they will do (i.e., dependability), and their organizations are capable to do what they say they will do (i.e., competence) (Hon and Grunig, 1999).

In the following literature review section, the authors will define the key concepts that the present study focuses on – trust, authentic leadership, transparent organizational communication, and employee engagement – and hypothesize and further explain the relationships between the variables based on the aforementioned employee voice theory, JD-R model, and SET.
Literature review

Trust

Mayer et al. (1995) provided one of the most widely cited definitions of trust: “The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other party” (p. 712). Based upon an extensive review of cross-disciplinary research on trust, Lewicki et al. (2006) argued that Mayer et al.’s definition captured two essential components: willingness to accept vulnerability and positive expectations of another party. Aligned with Mayer et al.’s conceptualization, this study thus defines trust as the willingness of employees to be vulnerable to the actions of their organizations based on their positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of the organizations.

Cummings and Bromily (1996) and Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) agreed on a multidimensional approach in order to explain the intricacies of the willingness of one party to rely on another. Mayer et al. (1995) identified three dimensions that can define one party’s trustworthiness, namely, competence, benevolence or concern, and integrity. Specifically, competence indicates the knowledge, skills, and capabilities of the trustee (e.g. an organization). Benevolence or concern indicates the trustor’s (e.g. employee’s) belief about the trustee’s general goodwill toward them. Finally, integrity reflects the trustor’s perception that the trustee holds some moral principles acceptable to the trustor (Mayer et al., 1995).

The emergence of trust relies on some kind of “behavioral manifestation” (Dietz, 2011, p. 215). Based on this logic, employees assess whether to trust their organization by making inferences from their interactions with their supervisors or leaders (Tan and Tan, 2000). Research (Casimir et al., 2006; Norman et al., 2010; Wang and Hsieh, 2013) has indicated that effective leadership predicts employee trust. Walumbwa et al. (2008, 2011) acknowledged authentic leadership as a root construct of all positive forms of leadership. That is why this study focuses on the impact of authentic leadership on employees’ trust toward their organizations.

Authentic leadership

The essence of authenticity is to understand, accept, and stay true to oneself (Harter, 2002). Communication researchers have recently emphasized the need of integrating authenticity into research and practice in communications management (Edwards, 2010; Men, 2014, 2015; Men and Stacks, 2014; Molleda, 2010). Specifically, authentic leadership is defined as “a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with coworkers, fostering positive self-development” (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94).

Authentic leadership behavior comprises four dimensions: self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced information processing, and relational transparency, which has received wide empirical support (Bamford et al., 2013; Valsania et al., 2012). Self-awareness denotes the extent to which a leader understands his or her strengths, weaknesses, values, and motives as well as recognizing how others perceive their leadership (Avolio et al., 2004). Internalized moral perspective involves behavior being directed by internal moral standards and values rather than being pressured by external forces (e.g. peers, society, or organizations) (Gardner et al., 2005). Balanced information processing refers to objectively analyzing all relevant information before making decisions and to actively soliciting even challenging input or feedback (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Relational transparency deals with openly sharing information, expressing true thoughts and feelings, and cultivating openness with others to express their true ideas (Avolio et al., 2009).
Transparent organizational communication

As stakeholders increasingly demand organizational transparency and accountability, the concept of transparency has ascended to prominence in strategic communication (Albu and Wehmeier, 2014; Rawlins, 2009; Rogoff, 2010). Mere information disclosure and honesty are not sufficient to form transparency (Baker, 2008; Rawlins, 2008). Gower (2006) and Heald (2006) stressed that transparency should include the audience and relate to the audience's ability to process and interpret the information.

After reviewing the research on transparency in organizational studies and communications, Rawlins (2009) defined organizational transparency as "deliberate attempt to make available all legally releasable information – whether positive or negative in nature – in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies, and practices" (p. 75). According to Rawlins, transparent organizational communication includes three elements: participation, accountability, and substantial information. Participation refers to involving stakeholders in identifying the information needed to make accurate decisions. Transparency cannot satisfy the stakeholders' needs unless an organization understands their information needs. Accountability holds organizations accountable for their behaviors and words. Substantial information involves providing truthful, substantial, and useful information to the relevant parties. Information disclosure needs to contain substantial completeness that emphasizes the needs of the receiver (Rawlins, 2009).

Employee engagement

Both management and communication scholars have increasingly recognized the significant positive impact of high employee engagement upon organizations that strive to accomplish business success and organizational growth in the long run (Robinson et al., 2004). Kahn (1990) first conceptualized personal engagement in the management literature as a state when "people employ and express themselves, physically, cognitively or emotionally during role performances" (p. 964). Drawing upon this foundational work, Schaufeli et al. (2002) began to define employee engagement as a particular work-related state of mind. As reviewed in Chughtai and Buckley (2008), one approach calculates employee engagement through energy, involvement, and efficacy, which are complete opposites of the key dimensions of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness (Maslach and Leiter, 1997; Maslach et al., 2001). Another approach designates employee engagement as a “positive, fulfilling work related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption” (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74).

Expanding the scope of the definition from the individual to the organizational level, in employee communications literature (Mishra et al., 2014), researchers defined employee engagement as “[employees’] cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes” (Shuck and Wollard, 2010, p. 103), “a strong emotional bond [that employees build with] their employer [that helps] the organization succeed” (Quirke, 2008, p. 102) and “an employee’s emotional and intellectual commitment to their organization and its success” (Hewitt Associates, 2009, p. 1).

Based on the above-reviewed literature, this study conceptualizes engagement as employees’ persistent, pervasive, and fulfilling work-related state of mind, characterized by positive affect on their organizations and a high level of perceived empowerment when performing their work roles (Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Authentic leadership and transparent organizational communication leading to employee engagement

Authentic immediate supervisors play a critical role in how employees perceive their organization’s transparency of communication. When interacting with supervisors who
understand their own strengths and weaknesses, who always communicate with their subordinates clearly, who demonstrate consistency between their beliefs and actions, and who respect alternative or opposite opinions (Walumbwa et al., 2008), employees tend to feel that they receive enough substantial information for them to participate in decision making and problem solving and that their organizations are accountable for their actions and policies (Martinson, 1996; Rawlins, 2009; Stirton and Lodge, 2001). Prior empirical studies have examined how authentic managers help build up a constructive organizational environment characterized by dialogue, transparency, and organizational learning (Mazutis and Slawinski, 2008). Fulmer and Gelfand’s longitudinal study concluded that authentic leaders, in order to foster trust at individual, group, and organizational levels, must engage in transparent communication. Based on the reviewed literature and empirical evidence, the authors proposed the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Authentic leadership is positively related to transparent organizational communication.

Researchers also found that front-line supervisors play a key role in cultivating and strengthening employee engagement (Therkelsen and Fiebich, 2003). When employees perceive greater supervisory support, they tend to be more engaged at work (Saks, 2006). Direct supervisors play an influential role in sharing reliable information and openly communicating with their employees, promoting a high level of commitment among employees, and facilitating their understanding of organizational goals (Welch and Jackson, 2007). It is hence more likely for employees to perceive a high level of positive affect and empowerment toward their organization (Saks, 2006; Watson Wyatt White Paper, 2008-2009). Prior empirical findings also suggested that resource-rich work environments, such as supervisors’ supportive leadership behaviors, are likely to foster employee engagement (Mishra et al., 2014). Walumbwa et al. (2010) explored the relationship of authentic leadership to employee engagement with data collected from 129 supervisors and 387 direct reports from two telecommunication firms in China. The results of a hierarchical linear modeling analysis showed that authentic leadership significantly predicted employee engagement. Alok and Israel (2012) conducted an online survey with 117 employees (82 men and women) in India that examined the relationship between leadership and employee engagement. The results showed a significant positive association leading from authentic leadership to employee engagement. Thus, the authors proposed the following hypothesis:

**H2.** Authentic leadership is positively linked to employee engagement.

Although there is not ample empirical evidence linking transparent organizational communication and employee engagement, the JD-R model (Menguc et al., 2013) provides a plausible theoretical explanation for the link. According to the JD-R model, transparent communication within an organization serves as a key resource that motivates employees to be engaged in the workplace (Saks, 2006; Watson Wyatt White Paper, 2008-2009). More specifically, the level of employee engagement remains high when the perceived level of transparent communication within an organization is high – employees perceive that their organizations encourage their active participation in information acquisition and distribution, decision making, policy making, provide employees with candid feedback on their performance and actionable suggestions for professional development, and truthfully communicate to employees with substantial information on organizational subjects, incidents, and events (Jaworski and Kohli, 1991). Clear and consistent communication with employees contributes to employee engagement (Saks, 2006; Watson Wyatt White Paper, 2008-2009). Therefore, the authors proposed the following hypothesis in the conceptual model:

**H3.** Transparent organizational communication is positively associated with employee engagement.
Linking trust to leadership, organizational communication, and employee engagement

As mentioned previously, employees make inferences of trust in organizations based on their assessment of their supervisors’ or leaders’ trustworthiness founded on their interactions with them (Casimir et al., 2006; Jung and Avolio, 2000; Tan and Tan, 2000). Perception of trust relies considerably on the consistency between beliefs and actions (Clutterbuck and Hirst, 2002). Authentic leaders need to understand their own merits and weakness, exhibit strong moral values and behavior integrity, and demonstrate genuine concern for others. This cultivates a sense of pride among their coworkers and, significantly, trust in the leaders’ competence, goodwill, reliability, and integrity (i.e. the essential dimensions of trust) (Norman et al., 2010; George and Sims, 2007). Such trust in a leader then extends to trust in the organizations (Dietz, 2011; Wang and Hsieh, 2013). The authors therefore proposed the following hypothesis:

**H4.** Authentic leadership positively relates to the level of trust that employees have toward their organizations.

Transparent organizational communication is characterized by involving stakeholders (e.g. employees) into decision making, holding organizational accountable for their actions and words, and providing substantial, accurate, and useful information (Rawlins, 2009). When leaders engage in transparent communication, their coworkers are likely to perceive the consistency between the leaders’ beliefs and actions (Avolio et al., 2004; Vogelgesang et al., 2013). Such constancy perception helps coworkers develop and assess expectations about the leaders and the organization’s ability, reliability, and integrity that are core dimensions of trust. Therefore, transparent organizational communication ultimately fosters trust among employees toward their organizations (Albu and Wehmeier, 2014; Thomas et al., 2009). The authors thus developed the following hypothesis:

**H5.** Transparent organizational communication is positively associated with employees’ trust toward their organizations.

Employee engagement indicates a positive psychological mindset, prompting employees to enjoy their work, stay committed to the work, and to become more efficient and involved in the work (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010). This positive affective state in turn reflects employees’ confidence in their organization’s competence and dependableness to accomplish the tasks (Buckley, 2011; Wong et al., 2010). Furthermore, positive emotions or moods felt by individuals are likely to stimulate more favorable attitudes toward others, such as increased trust (Jones and George, 1998; Williams, 2001). The authors therefore proposed the following hypothesis:

**H6.** Employee engagement is positively related to the level of trust that employees have toward their organizations.

Transparent organizational communication and employee engagement as mediators

As evident in the above-reviewed literature, immediate supervisors’ authentic leadership behaviors may affect work- and organization-related outcomes through mediators at the organizational level (Menguc et al., 2013), such as transparent organizational communication (Rawlins, 2009) and employees’ level of engagement with their organization (Saks, 2006). Therefore, the authors added into the hypothesized model (Figure 1) the following hypotheses indicating mediating relationships:

**H7.** Transparent organizational communication mediates the effect of authentic leadership on employee engagement (a) and the effect of that on trust (b).
H8. Employee engagement mediates the effect of authentic leadership (a) and that of transparent organizational communication (b) on trust.

H9. Transparent organizational communication and employee engagement mediate the effect of authentic leadership on trust.

Approach of this study
Despite that the authors of the paper will test a conceptual model by using their collected empirical survey data from a managerialistic and rationalistic approach, they well acknowledge the existence and significance of critical and reflexive literature on the key concepts in the present study (e.g. Christensen, 2002; Edwards, 2010; Watson, 2010). For instance, Edwards (2010) discussed increased skepticism about the extent to which an organization can be truly authentic in its promotional communication. The authors completely agree that the notion of authentic communication is complex: research has defined it as “an individual attribute, an organizational attribute, and a source of organisational capital in the quest for a market” (Edwards, 2010, p. 192). Given the purpose of problematizing authenticity as an organizational attribute, Edwards (2010) argued for understanding it as an individual attribute and considering the sophisticated involvement of target audiences in defining the intent of organizational communication. Likewise, Christensen (2002) deconstructed all “conventional assumptions” underlying the use of the term “transparency” and redefined it as “a staging process” (p. 162). Christensen (2002) argued that researchers and practitioners should pay more attention to how organizations define and institutionalize the standards for information disclosure and question the extent to which these standards can really guide organizational behavior to reduce uncertainty to the level that external audiences desire. The authors appreciate all critical scholarship that examines the paradoxes and contradictions existing in complex organizational life. Nevertheless, as Toth (2010) summarized, critical theory and strategic management/communication are two of the major research paradigms applied in research and practice in our field. Resting upon different assumptions about communication phenomena, the two vastly different paradigms can be useful for solving the same or different problems of communication (Toth, 2010, p. 714).

Method
Using the assistance of a global premier provider of survey services, Survey Sampling International (SSI, www.surveysampling.com), the authors conducted a quantitative online survey on a random sample of 391 employees working across various industry...
sectors in the USA in November 2013. To enhance data generalizability, individual employees with different positions in medium and large corporations were recruited from the 1.5 million-member research panel of SSI. The stratified and quota random sampling methods were adopted to obtain a representative sample with comparable age groups, genders, corporation sizes, and levels of position, income, and education. Through SSI’s patented Dynamix Sampling Platform, participants who met the sample selection requirements received the authors’ survey invitation e-mail with the link to the online survey posted on Qualtrics. A total of 430 responses were collected during the two-week data collection period, achieving a 90 percent quoted incidence rate of the survey. After the incomplete and streamline cases were excluded, the authors accomplished a final sample size of 391 to be analyzed in the present study. Table I displays participants’ descriptive characteristics.

All measurement items in the questionnaire used a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). To examine trust, the authors adapted and utilized four items from Hon and Grunig (1999) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$). In the context of the present study, the authors used 11 items adapted from Kang (2014) and Saks (2006) to measure employee engagement. This consisted of two sub-scales: six items for positive affect and five items for empowerment. Cronbach’s $\alpha$’s were 0.94 and 0.92 for positive affect and empowerment, respectively. To assess authentic leadership, the authors adopted all 14 items from Neider and Schriesheim’s (2011) study with four conceptual dimensions: self-awareness (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$), relational transparency (e.g. Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$), internalized moral perspective (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$), and balanced processing (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$). As for transparent organizational communication, the authors used the 18-item scale that Rawlins (2009) proposed: participation, substantial information, and accountability. Likewise, the transparent organizational communication items demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.94$ for participation, 0.95 for substantial information, and 0.92 for accountability).

The authors performed a two-step structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis via the Mplus 7.4 program to test all hypotheses. Based on the a priori theoretical conceptualizations of the constructs, the authors tested a measurement model. Covariance paths among items within the same latent factors were added to control for content redundancy (Byrne, 2010; Raykov and Marcoulides, 2006). The authors then tested the structural model. In performing the two-step SEM analysis, the authors respected the data-model fit criteria that Hu and Bentler (1999) established.

Results
Preliminary data analysis
Descriptive statistics. As presented in Table II, the results of the descriptive analysis show that participants reported moderately high authentic leadership behaviors in their managers ($M_{self-awareness} = 4.90, SD = 1.39, n = 391$; $M_{relational transparency} = 5.13, SD = 1.45, n = 391$; $M_{internalized moral perspective} = 5.00, SD = 1.31, n = 391$; $M_{balanced processing} = 4.89, SD = 1.38, n = 391$). Moreover, the amount of information that the employers provided to the participants was moderate ($M_{substantiality} = 4.92, SD = 1.25, n = 391$). The employers that they worked for also demonstrated moderately high participation ($M_{participation} = 4.57, SD = 1.41, n = 391$) and accountability ($M_{accountability} = 4.43, SD = 1.42, n = 391$) in transparent organizational communication. In addition, the participants perceived a moderately high level of trust toward their organizations ($M_{trust} = 4.34, SD = 1.47, n = 391$). In terms of employee engagement, the participants reported a moderately high level of positive affect ($M_{positive affect} = 4.70, SD = 1.36, n = 391$) and empowerment ($M_{empowerment} = 4.47, SD = 1.44, n = 391$). Correlations between the observed variables in this study ranged from 0.41 to 0.96 ($p < 0.01$). Authentic leadership is the only exogenous variable in the model.
Table I. Participant profile for the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample characteristics</th>
<th>Valid no. of sample</th>
<th>Valid % of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>184</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>205</td>
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<td><strong>Size of employer</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>100-250 employees</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>251-500 employees</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>16.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>501-1,000 employees</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>14.8</td>
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<td>1,001-3,000 employees</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,001-5,000 employees</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 7,000 employees</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>29.4</td>
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<td><strong>Industry sector</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Accommodation and food services</td>
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<td>2.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>9.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administration, business support, and waste management services</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting</td>
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<td>0.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arts, entertainment, and recreation</td>
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<td>3.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional, scientific, and technical services</td>
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<td>11.8</td>
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<td>Construction</td>
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<td>Real estate and rental and leasing</td>
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<td>Educational services</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail trade</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance and insurance</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation and warehousing</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare and social assistance</td>
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<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilities</td>
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<td>1.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Level of position</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>206</td>
<td>52.7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>320</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5.9</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Asians</td>
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<td>6.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The highest level of education</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No college (secondary education or below)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vocational level (including diploma, higher diploma and associate)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A master’s degree</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A doctorate degree</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>$30,000-$49,999</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000-$69,999</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$70,000-$89,999</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Tests on socio-demographic variables. A series of hierarchical linear regression analyses identified no significant effects based on corporation size, industry type, tenure, position level, gender, age, ethnicity, education level, or annual income upon the four constructs in the hypothesized model, except for that of position level ($\beta = -0.17, p < 0.001$) and educational level ($\beta = -0.12, p < 0.01$) on transparent organizational communication, that of corporation size upon trust ($\beta = -0.05, p < 0.05$), and that of position level ($\beta = -0.17, p < 0.001$) on employee engagement. Based on the results of the preliminary tests and the reviewed literature, the authors controlled for three variables in the SEM analysis: position level, educational level, and corporation size.

Measurement model results
Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) generated results that were consistent with what was revealed in previous literature. Authentic leadership, transparent organizational communication, and employee engagement formed second-order constructs with their underlying distinctive first-order factors. The model achieved acceptable data-model fit \( (\text{CFI} = 0.96; \text{RMSEA} = 0.043 [90\% \text{ CI: } 0.040-0.046]; \text{SRMR} = 0.05; \chi^2 = 1,805.57 (p < 0.001); \text{df} = 1,059; n = 383) \). Standardized coefficients of measurement indicators in the CFA model are presented in Table III.

Structural model results
The hypothesized structural model demonstrated satisfactory fit with the data: \( \text{CFI} = 0.96; \text{RMSEA} = 0.044 [90\% \text{ CI: } 0.041-0.047]; \text{SRMR} = 0.04; \chi^2 = 1,843.25 (p < 0.001); \text{df} = 1,058; n = 383 \). The results suggest that all standardized path coefficients are statistically significant except for the direct effect of authentic leadership on employee engagement (Figure 2). For the sake of model parsimony, the authors reduced the model by deleting this non-significant path. The simplified model (Figure 3) was re-estimated and compared to the hypothesized model via nested model comparison (Bowen and Guo, 2011; Newsom, 2015). The estimation of the simplified model also achieved good data-model fit \( (\text{CFI} = 0.96; \text{RMSEA} = 0.044 [90\% \text{ CI: } 0.041-0.047]; \text{SRMR} = 0.04; \chi^2 = 1,843.74; (p < 0.001); \text{df} = 1,059; n = 383) \). The model fit change was not statistically significant: $\Delta \chi^2(1, n = 383) = 0.49, p = 0.516$ (see Table IV). Therefore, the more parsimonious model (i.e. the simplified model) was retained (Figure 3).

Test of hypotheses
Direct effects. As shown in the simplified model, the relationship between authentic leadership and transparent communication was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.72, p < 0.001$), supporting $H1$. $R^2$ for transparent organizational communication equaled 0.55. The standardized path coefficient for the association between transparent organizational communication and employee engagement ($\beta = 0.83, p < 0.001$) was both significant and positive. $H3$ was thus supported. $R^2$ for employee engagement was 0.69. The link between

<table>
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<th>Sample characteristics</th>
<th>Valid no. of sample</th>
<th>Valid % of sample</th>
</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>$180,000-200,000$</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $200,000$</td>
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<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $n = 391$

Table I.
Table II. Descriptive statistics of first-order and second-order variables in the study (mean, standard deviation, and correlations).

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<th>10</th>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>0.57**</td>
<td>0.57**</td>
<td>0.83**</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.47</td>
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<td>0.94**</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>0.78**</td>
<td>0.96**</td>
<td>0.98**</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 1 = AL (self-awareness); 2 = AL (relational transparency); 3 = AL (internalized moral perspective); 4 = AL (balanced processing); 5 = TC (participation); 6 = TC (substantiality); 7 = TC (accountability); 8 = Trust; 9 = EE (positive affect); 10 = EE (empowerment); 11 = AL (authentic leadership); 12 = TC (transparent communication); 13 = EE (employee engagement). **Significant at $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)
authentic leadership and trust was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.16, p < 0.01$), supporting $H4$. Moreover, $H5$ and $H6$ were also supported. The link between transparent organizational communication and trust ($\beta = 0.94, p < 0.001$) and that between employee engagement and trust ($\beta = 0.17, p < 0.05$) were significant and positive as well. $R^2$ for trust was 0.96.

Indirect effects. To examine the indirect effects in the model (Figure 3), the authors conducted a mediation test with a bootstrapping procedure ($n = 5,000$ samples). The results revealed a significant indirect effect of authentic leadership on employee engagement via transparent organizational communication ($\beta = 0.59, p < 0.001 [95\% CI: 0.44-0.75]$). The indirect effect of authentic leadership on trust via transparent organizational communication was significant as well ($\beta = 0.68, p < 0.001 [95\% CI: 0.54-0.81]$), thus supporting both $H7a$ and $H7b$. Employee engagement significantly mediated the effect of
transparent organizational communication on trust ($\beta = 0.14, p < 0.05$ [95% CI: 0.04-0.24]). Therefore, $H_{8b}$ was supported. Finally, transparent organizational communication and employee engagement jointly mediated the effect of authentic leadership on trust ($\beta = 0.10, p < 0.05$ [95% CI: 0.02-0.18]). $H_9$ was supported.

**Discussion**

*Employee engagement as a key contributor to trust*

This study provides further empirical support for the centrality of employee engagement in generating employee trust in organizations. As a positive psychological state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002), employee engagement can be viewed as a part of psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007), defined as having confidence in accomplishing challenging tasks, having optimism about future success, displaying flexibility in adjusting goals in challenging times, and having perseverance to bounce back and achieve goals. Trust, on the other hand, is perceived as a relational capital (Eikeland, 2015) based on its root in relational experience. The positive, significant association between employee engagement and trust identified in this study thus suggests a mechanism to create and strengthen relational capital through psychological capital. In other words, a satisfying mindset in the form of employee engagement can generate a heightened experience of trust in other parties, such as trust in organizations (Dunn and Schweitzer, 2005; Jones and George, 1998).

*Authentic leadership and transparent organizational communication leading to trust*

The results of this study suggest that authentic leadership exerts both a direct and an indirect influence on employee trust, with the indirect impact via transparent organizational communication.
communication more significant than the direct one, explaining substantially more variance in employee trust. The present study thus highlights the significance of transparency in communication in linking its antecedents and organizational outcomes (Auger, 2014; Edwards, 2010; Taiminen et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2009). It also provides much-needed empirical evidence indicating that managers who practice with high moral standards, display concern about their subordinates’ interests, and actively make their values transparent (Avolio et al., 2004) can foster an inductive organizational environment for crafting employee trust.

**Linking authentic leadership to trust: the role of transparent organizational communication and employee engagement**

Ample previous research has identified a significant and positive relationship between authentic leadership and employee trust (Casimir et al., 2006; Dietz, 2011; Jung and Avolio, 2000; Kouzes and Posner, 2002; Tan and Tan, 2000). In accordance with previous literature, the direct link between authentic leadership and employee trust was statistically positive and significant. However, the mediation effects of authentic leadership on trust via transparent organizational communication and both transparent organizational communication and employee engagement were also significant, accounting for an even greater amount of variance in employee trust. This finding suggests that the prevalence of transparent organizational communication and a high level of employee engagement play a more significant role in cultivating employee trust than the presence of immediate supervisors’ authentic leadership behaviors. It is more through promoting transparent organizational communication in which employees constantly receive substantial information from their employers and are invited to participate in active information identification and dissemination (Rawlins, 2009), and when employees perceive a high level of positive affect and empowerment (Saks, 2006), they tend to place more trust on their organizations.

**The linkages between authentic leadership, transparent organizational communication, and employee engagement**

This study demonstrates that authentic leadership exerts a strong positive effect on transparent organizational communication, and transparent organizational communication significantly impacted employee engagement. Unexpectedly, contradictory to the extant literature (Saks, 2006; Watson Wyatt White Paper, 2008-2009), the direct link between authentic leadership and employee engagement turned out to be statistically non-significant. Yet, its indirect effect upon engagement via transparent organizational communication was significant and substantial, explaining almost half of the variance in employee engagement. As indicated in prior literature (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Rawlins, 2009), authentic managers significantly contribute to the cultivation and enhancement of transparent organizational communication, which further promotes a nurturing organizational environment where employees demonstrate a high level of positive affect toward their employers and feel empowered to actively participate in organizational life (Menguc et al., 2013; Saks, 2006). The finding on transparent organizational communication as a direct antecedent leading to employee engagement and an indirect mediator linking authentic leadership to employee trust adds to the growing body of knowledge on the significant effects of strategic communication management on organization-related outcomes (Men and Stacks, 2014; Rawlins, 2009), and at the same time identifies the essential role of transparent organizational communication in cultivating an engaged workforce that contributes to business success in the long run (Saks, 2006; Watson Wyatt White Paper, 2008-2009).
The implications of the study

This study and its key findings provide both theoretical and managerial implications for management and communication researchers and professionals. It draws upon employee voice theory (Besieux et al., 2015), SET (Blau, 1964), and the JD-R model (Menguc et al., 2013) to offer a plausible theoretical explanation for a conceptual model exhibiting the interrelationships among authenticity, transparency, engagement, and employee trust, four core values highlighted in literature and extensively discussed in the industry. It also identifies the significance of transparent organizational communication (Rawlins, 2009) in producing an engaged workforce and cultivating employee trust that are strongly associated with an organization’s and an industry’s resilient long-term development.

The findings of this study suggest important implications for the practice of organizational communication management at both individual and organizational levels. First, the results of this study provided further support for the core dimensions (e.g. self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced information processing, and relational transparency) of authentic leadership. Organizations hence could use these indicators to develop and promote such authentic leaders to create desirable outcomes at both the individual level (e.g. employee engagement) and the organizational level (e.g. trust). Management can launch leadership development training workshops to cultivate the essential traits of authentic leadership.

Gaining trust from employees is a fundamental component of effective leadership. Consistency in communication and action breeds trust, the emotional glue that connects team members and leaders (Clutterbuck and Hirst, 2002). Leaders thus need to become role models for communication. In practice, organizational leaders (e.g. managers, direct supervisors) can strive to be authentic by understanding their own merits and weakness, showing consistency between their beliefs and actions, and honestly sharing information with coworkers. Guided by their virtues, authentic leaders demonstrate their genuine consideration for others (George and Sims, 2007) and incorporate inputs from employees into decision making (Yukl, 2006).

Importantly, the multipath ways to elicit employee trust on organizations as indicated in the findings accentuate the value of such authentic leaders in generating trust through their inherent behaviors and fostering a formal organizational mechanism in terms of transparent organizational communication. Hence, organizations could rely on authentic leaders to cultivate an organizational communication system rooted in transparency.

Second, in order to improve psychological capital (e.g. employee engagement) and relational capital (e.g. employee trust), organizations should ensure to include the three key dimensions in their organizational communication. Specifically, authentic leaders should be eager to invite employees to participate in identifying their information needs. Based on such understanding, organizations can then provide truthful, substantial, and useful information to employees in order to satisfy their needs. Furthermore, leaders or managers should create proper communication mechanism for employees to provide feedback on leadership behaviors, which fosters accountability that holds leaders accountable for their words and actions. As a result of this transparent communication, employees are likely to feel more involved, perceive a stronger emotional bond with their organization, and feel empowered to fulfill organizational goals.

Third, management needs to realize that leadership (e.g. authentic leadership) alone is not sufficient to boost a fulfilling work-related mindset among employees toward their employers and to make them feel enabled and dedicated to perform their organizational roles. Rather, transparent organizational communication plays a central role in inducing such a positive psychological-affective state among employees. The linking node between authentic leadership and engaged employees resides in communication. Transparent communication has become a vehicle for authentic leaders to demonstrate their core leadership traits. To strengthen this
association, organizations should provide leaders with communication trainings on practicing transparency in interaction with employees.

Particularly to cultivate transparent communication, management first needs to creatively develop various communication mechanism (e.g. meetings with supervisors, soliciting employee feedback, developing social listening on company’s social media outlets) to actively involve employees in identifying their crucial information needs for decision making. Second, content of communication with employees needs to be relevant, complete, accurate, and substantial. Finally, management needs to disclose accurately and timely an organization’s activities and plans as well as holding those activities accountable.

In summary, based on the findings and their implications, the authors suggest the following recommendations for organizations to effectively create employee engagement and foster employee trust:

(1) top management should rely on the core dimensions of authentic leadership to identify, promote, and train authentic leaders in the process of personnel selection and employee development;

(2) effective organizational communication should establish communication mechanisms that facilitate employees’ participation in identifying their communication needs when making decisions, enable employees to provide feedback in order to hold leaders’ actions and words accountable, and provide employees with substantial, truthful, as well as useful information; and

(3) organizations need to provide training workshops to leaders on how to foster transparent communication with employees, specifically involving employees’ voices for their information needs, communicating how leaders hold themselves accountable, and offering complete, truthful, and useful information to employees.

By committing to encouraging authentic leaders and fostering transparent communication, organization can create among employees a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind (i.e. employee engagement) characterized by positive affect toward their employers and a strong sense of empowerment to accomplish their tasks. Such positive psychological capital ultimately leads to higher trust among employees toward the organization.

Limitations and future research directions
Despite some actionable insights resulted from the present study, several limitations need to be further addressed in future similar studies. The insignificant direct relationship between authentic leadership and employee engagement was in opposition to what the extant research predicted. More empirical studies are thus called for to scrutinize the role of authentic leadership as being associated with communication, engagement, trust, and other organizational outcome variables. Finally, future studies may also explore other models linking different leadership styles and organizational communication structures to variables of great value to employees, organization, and the profession, including but not limited to engagement, trust, commitment, reputation, sustainability, and change management.

Notes
1. In the present study, organizational communication is defined as a field in communication studies as a discipline. Studies on an organizational communication system focus on analyzing and criticizing the role of communication in organizational contexts (e.g. formal and informal communication within organizations, horizontal and upward communication through various channels, transparent communication or lack of transparency within organizations, etc.) (McPhee and Zaug, 2000).
2. In the present study, strategic communication is defined as the “purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3).

3. Survey Sampling International (SSI) built multiple levels of randomization into its Dynamix sampling system. Participants who enter the system may qualify for multiple active online surveys based on their reported demographics and other characteristics. SSI randomly selects ten refinement questions representing ten of the potential projects and presents them to all prospective participants. Based upon the answers from the participants, SSI decides whether they qualify for anywhere from 0 to 10 of the ten surveys. To handle this situation, SSI builds another level of randomization in the system that selects the most suitable survey for every participant to take part in. The methodological merit of this method lies in the fact that it minimizes the self-selection bias inherent in traditional contact methods – all participants are presented with only one survey at a time and cannot self-select ones with the most appealing topics and/or the most attractive rewards (Survey Sampling International, 2010).

4. In this paper, the authors conducted a structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis to test all the hypotheses. In all SEM analyses, it is very important to examine the fit of an estimated model (see Figures 2 and 3) – the extent to which it models the collected data (Chou and Bentler, 1995). The output of SEM programs, in particular, assessment of fit results essentially reflects how similar the estimated data based on the relationships between variables in the theoretical model are to matrices containing the relationships in the actual collected data (Loehlin, 2004). In SEM analyses, three commonly used fit indices include: comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean residual (SRMR). The authors followed the data-model fit criteria that Hu and Bentler (1999) established: CFI ≥ 0.96 and SRMR ≤ 0.10 or RMSEA ≤ 0.06 and SRMR ≤ 0.10. Based on the criteria, the measurement model, the hypothesized structural model, and the final simplified structural model all yielded good, satisfactory, or acceptable data-model fit. See below: the measurement model: CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.043 [90% CI: 0.040-0.046]; SRMR = 0.05; the hypothesized structural model: CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.044 [90% CI: 0.041-0.047]; SRMR = 0.04; the simplified structural model: CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.044 [90% CI: 0.041-0.047]; SRMR = 0.04.

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**Corresponding author**

Yi Luo can be contacted at: luoy@mail.montclair.edu
It’s My Time: applying the health belief model to prevent cervical cancer among college-age women

Beth Sundstrom
Department of Communication, College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina, USA
Heather M. Brandt
University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina, USA
Lisa Gray
University of North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA, and
Jennifer Young Pierce
Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, South Carolina, USA

Abstract
Purpose – Cervical cancer (CxCa) incidence and mortality remain unacceptably high in South Carolina, USA, presenting an ideal opportunity for intervention. To address this need, Cervical Cancer-Free South Carolina developed an academic-community partnership with researchers and students at a public university to design, implement, and evaluate a theory-based CxCa communication campaign, It’s My Time. The paper aims to discuss this issue.

Design/methodology/approach – The goal of this campaign was to decrease CxCa by increasing human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination and appropriate screening. This paper describes the development, implementation, and evaluation of a successful theory-based CxCa prevention communication campaign for college women based on formative audience research and targeted messages delivered to audience segments through new and traditional communication channels. The health belief model (HBM) served as a theoretical framework for the campaign throughout development, implementation, and evaluation.

Findings – This campaign demonstrated the effectiveness of the HBM to address CxCa prevention, including HPV vaccine acceptability. The campaign aimed to increase perceptions of susceptibility, which were low, by emphasizing that HPV is a sexually transmitted infection. A community-based grassroots approach to addressing disparities in CxCa prevention increased benefits and decreased barriers. Social media emerged as a particularly appropriate platform to disseminate cues to action. In total, 60 percent of participants who responded to an anonymous web-based survey evaluation indicated that they received the HPV vaccine as a result of campaign messages.

Originality/value – This paper offers practical suggestions to campaign planners about building academic-community partnerships to develop theory-based communication campaigns that include conducting formative research, segmenting target audiences, engaging with young people, and incorporating social media.

Keywords Social media, Campaigns, Strategic communication, Health communication

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Cervical cancer (CxCa) remains a critical public health issue despite medical advancements in immunization, screening, and treatment. In the USA, the regional South maintains the highest incidence of CxCa cases and deaths with the lowest prevalence of screening (Benard et al., 2014). In 2013, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ranked South Carolina 11th in CxCa incidence and 9th in CxCa mortality in the USA (US Cancer Statistics Working Group, 2016). In South Carolina, USA, 191 new cases of CxCa are diagnosed each year and six to seven women die from CxCa each month (South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, 2010).

The causative agent of virtually all cases of CxCa is persistent infection with certain human papillomavirus (HPV) types (The American College of Obstetricians and
Gynecologists, 2015). Gardasil, Gardasil 9, and Cervarix immunizations are approved for females and males ages 9 through 26 to protect against infection with specific types of HPV known to cause CxCa, vulvar cancer, vaginal cancer, genital warts, penile cancer, anal cancer, and cancers of the mouth and pharynx (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; Federal Drug Administration, 2015). The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends vaccination through a two-shot series among girls and boys ages 9 through 14 years and a three-dose schedule for those 15 through 26 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015; Meites et al., 2016). Approximately, half of new HPV infections occur among young adults ages 15-24 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). As a result, college-age women and men are at increased risk of acquiring HPV and considered an important “catch-up” population for the HPV vaccination (Brown et al., 2005).

HPV vaccines are effective and have significantly reduced infections among women (Markowitz et al., 2013). A recent systematic review found that HPV vaccination reduced rates of genital warts, HPV, and cervical lesions (Drolet et al., 2015). Despite the effectiveness of the vaccine, low uptake remains a problem with only 26.6 percent of 13-17 year old females in South Carolina, USA receiving three vaccine doses in 2012 compared with 33.4 percent across the USA (Elam-Evans et al., 2014). In 2014, South Carolina, USA lagged behind the national average among those receiving at least one dose of the HPV vaccine, including females (52 percent vs 60 percent) and males (29 percent vs 42 percent) (Reagan-Steiner et al., 2015). Schiffman and Wacholder (2012) deem increasing coverage of adolescent females the most important public health issue in HPV vaccine efforts.

Historically, the majority of health communication campaigns to increase HPV vaccination targeted mothers, parents, and health care providers (e.g. Cates et al., 2011, 2014; Kennedy et al., 2011). The extant literature on health communication campaigns and messages targeting young women and college students is growing as researchers investigate opportunities to increase vaccination among vaccine-eligible populations (Cohen et al., 2015; Cohen and Head, 2013; Frank et al., 2015; Hopfer, 2011; Krawczyk et al., 2012; Macario and Matiella, 2015; Sundstrom et al., 2015; Vanderpool et al., 2013). Peer-to-peer campaigns successfully target social norms and promote HPV vaccination among young women (Hopfer and Clippard, 2010; Hopfer, 2011; Simmons et al., 2015). In particular, scholars argue that peer-based interventions developed collaboratively with health professionals should be implemented on college campuses to increase HPV vaccination (Bennett et al., 2012). As a result, the primary target audience of this campaign included college-age women. In order to reach college-age women, Cervical Cancer-Free South Carolina (CCFSC) developed an academic-community partnership with researchers and students at a public university to design, implement, and evaluate a theory-based CxCa communication campaign, It’s My Time. The goal of this campaign was to decrease CxCa by increasing HPV vaccination and appropriate screening among college-age women.

**Description of the academic-community partnership**

CCFSC was founded in 2012 to reduce the burden of CxCa in South Carolina, USA by increasing participation in CxCa screening; increasing adherence to follow-up care of abnormal screening results; increasing rates of HPV vaccination; and seeking additional funding to support CxCa screening and HPV vaccination. CCFSC is a partner state of the global Cervical Cancer-Free Coalition. CCFSC consists of individual and organizational partners. In addition to advocacy, CCFSC educates policy makers and promotes legislation to improve the initiation and completion of the HPV vaccine series.

In 2013-2014, CCFSC engaged in an academic-community partnership to design, implement, and evaluate a new theory-based communication campaign: It’s My Time (#MyTime) designed to decrease rates of CxCa. The academic-community partnership was developed by the co-chairs of CCFSC (HMB and JYP) and an associate professor of strategic
health communication at the College of Charleston (BS). Communication majors at the College of Charleston applied to enroll in a two-semester health communication capstone course. This type of field-based experiential learning with a community partner provided an instructional strategy that offered students real-world experience. Students served as part of a campaign team with professors and clinicians (including a gynecologic oncologist and a nurse practitioner) to design, implement, and evaluate the campaign. The class met twice per week from August 2013 through May 2014. The community partner joined the class for full campaign team meetings multiple times each semester. Students completed collaborative learning assignments by working together in small groups to conduct formative and evaluative research, perform critical analyses using key concepts and methodologies from the field of health communication, and “pitch” their ideas to the co-chairs of CCFSC. During the fall semester, the campaign team conducted primary and secondary research to inform campaign development. During the spring semester, the campaign team implemented and evaluated the campaign. A small grant from the College of Charleston to support innovative teaching and learning in the liberal arts and sciences provided funding for formative audience research, campaign implementation, and evaluation.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the development, implementation, and evaluation of a theory-based CxCa prevention communication campaign for college-age women. This paper describes the lessons learned from formative audience research, implementation and evaluation of the campaign. Campaign dissemination occurred primarily on the campus of a public university in an urban area in the Southeast region of the USA, however, outreach occurred throughout the local community, as well.

It’s My Time
Noar (2006) summarized the principles of effective health campaign design, including: using theory, conducting formative audience research, segmenting target audiences, tailoring (messages), targeting (communication channels), and conducting process and outcome evaluation. We used this campaign model to design, implement, and evaluate It’s My Time. This section describes each step of the campaign process.

Using theory: employing the health belief model (HBM)
According to Noar (2006), grounding the campaign in theory provides determinants to inform message development that will successfully change the target audience’s attitudes and behaviors. The HBM is an expectancy-value theoretical framework, which suggests that individuals who feel susceptible to the consequences of a health issue will change their behavior when the benefits outweigh the costs of adopting a behavior (Champion and Skinner, 2008). The HBM includes factors that may influence health-related behavior change, including HPV vaccination and CxCa screening (see Figure 1). Related to HPV vaccination and CxCa screening, the HBM suggests that behavior change may result from perceptions of susceptibility, likelihood of acquiring HPV (and developing CxCa); severity, the health and social consequences of HPV (and CxCa); benefits, the impact of HPV vaccination and CxCa screening (including preventing CxCa); barriers, the effort to receive the vaccine and complete CxCa screening, which may include health-related side effects, time, inconvenience, and expense of the vaccine series and screening; self-efficacy, the ability to successfully complete the behavior (e.g. HPV vaccination or CxCa screening) (Bandura, 2004); and cues to action, internal cues (e.g. emotions) and external cues (e.g. mass media, campaigns and interpersonal communication) that may impact decisions about HPV vaccination and CxCa screening (Cates et al., 2011; Frank et al., 2015; Glanz and Bishop, 2010).

Hornik and Yanovitzky (2003) argued that the HBM is one of the path of media effects most often used in the design and evaluation of communication campaigns.
Carpenter (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of studies incorporating the HBM and found that benefits and barriers are the best predictors of behavior change. Scholars suggest that the HBM provides an appropriate framework for health communication campaigns (Glanz and Bishop, 2010; León-Maldonado et al., 2016; Silk et al., 2011). Campaigns employing the HBM have addressed a variety of health behaviors, including tanning (Greene and Brinn, 2003), influenza vaccination, smoking, sexual behavior, exercise, and women’s cancer screening (Carpenter, 2010).

Based on a review of the literature, the HBM emerged as a superior theoretical framework to develop a CxCa communication campaign (Britt et al., 2014; Gerend and Shepherd, 2012). The theory was chosen a priori and informed formative audience research, campaign development, implementation, and evaluation. Scholars have expanded the conceptual operationalizations of the HBM, providing a model for applying the theory to health communication (Briones et al., 2012). Donadiki et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of implementing health communication campaigns that increase the benefits and decrease the barriers related to HPV vaccination. Health communication campaigns based on the HBM have successfully increased knowledge, intention, and initiation of the vaccine through traditional and new media (e.g. Cates et al., 2011; Frank et al., 2015; Krawczyk et al., 2012; Macario and Matiella, 2015).

There are strong relationships between the HBM and HPV vaccine acceptability (Brewer and Paezakas, 2007). Understanding the target audience’s perceptions of susceptibility, severity, benefits, and barriers provide an opportunity to develop effective campaigns (Donadiki et al., 2014). Increasing perceptions of susceptibility through knowledge of HPV is a significant predictor of vaccine uptake (Frank et al., 2015; Gerend and Shepherd, 2012). Although young women and men are aware of HPV (Allen et al., 2009; Gerend and Shepherd, 2012; Staggers et al., 2012; Tiro et al., 2007), they incorrectly perceived a low risk of contracting HPV because of a lack of knowledge about transmission and prevention (Allen et al., 2009; Cohen and Head, 2013; Krawczyk et al., 2012; Mills et al., 2013; Staggers et al., 2012; Tiro et al., 2007). Furthermore, emphasizing the HPV vaccination as cancer prevention may not increase perceptions of severity among young women and men, who may be more concerned about the immediate consequences of HPV, such as genital warts (Krieger and Sarge, 2013; Staggers et al., 2012).

The benefits young people are most concerned about include effectiveness and long-term safety of the HPV vaccine (Dillard, 2011; Kennedy et al., 2011). In addition, scholars emphasize the importance of understanding sociocultural values and acknowledging the impact of racial disparity on perceived benefits (Bynum et al., 2012; Vanderpool et al., 2013). Modifying barriers to HPV vaccination, such as lack of knowledge, social norms, safety concerns, and...
cost, may be effective in changing behavior (Donadiki et al., 2014; Gerend and Shepherd, 2012). Interpersonal communication and recommendations from mothers and physicians are among the most influential cues to action (Grantham et al., 2011; Kennedy et al., 2011; Raley et al., 2004; Roberto et al., 2011), while mass media convey misleading or ambiguous information, which may increase misinformation about the HPV vaccine (Cohen and Head, 2013; Mills et al., 2013). Gerend and Shepherd (2012) argued that future research should consider the mechanism of cues to action on indirect effects, including beliefs and attitudes.

Conducting formative research: understanding the target audience
Conducting formative research with the target audience provides insight to understand the desired behavior and important characteristics that help to segment the audience into subgroups (Noar, 2006). Formative research was used to develop campaign strategies, communication channels, and messages. The primary target audience of this campaign included college-age women. Interviewing college students and experts increases the credibility of study findings by uncovering multiple perspectives (Hopfer and Clippard, 2010). Completing a content analysis, focus groups with college women, and in-depth interviews with experts provided triangulation of data for campaign development (Yin, 2014). The campaign team employed Miles et al.’s (2014) qualitative data analysis techniques, including data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Findings informed the development of campaign strategies and messages. The College of Charleston’s Institutional Review Board approved each phase of this study.

Content analysis. A qualitative content analysis of popular US magazines’ coverage of HPV and CxCa (n = 80 articles) investigated the ways popular magazines persuade women how to think about CxCa and HPV, including any gaps, myths, or misinformation about these topics. Campaign planners have employed content analyses to better understand and design communication efforts targeting a variety of health issues, including cancer (Hurley et al., 2014) and HPV vaccination (Lepre, 2013). In line with previous studies employing the HBM as a conceptual framework, the content analysis provided an appropriate method to investigate the strengthening or weakening of health beliefs (Briones et al., 2012).

The Alliance for Audited Media, a nonprofit organization offering independently verified data to evaluate media, reported the top 25 magazines by single-copy sales. These 25 popular magazines were chosen for study, including such magazines as Vogue, Cosmopolitan, and Prevention (for the full list, see: Alliance for Audited Media, 2013). The top 25 magazines reach more teens and adults than primetime television programming (Kevorkian, 2013). Magazine readers (compared to other media) are more likely to be influential consumers of health care and provide advice to friends and family members (Kevorkian, 2013). All articles about HPV, HPV vaccination, or CxCa from the previous five-year period (2008-2013) were identified. A total of 80 articles were collected and analyzed.

Focus groups. Three focus groups with college-age women (n = 18) assessed perceived barriers to vaccination, and understanding of screening. Focus groups allow researchers to gain a better understanding of how individuals make meaning of the world around them (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Focus groups were conducted between October 2013 and November 2013. The campaign team conducted three focus groups with college women to assess perceived threat, benefits, barriers, and cues to action related to HPV vaccination and CxCa screening. Focus groups continued until theoretical saturation was reached, indicating HBM concepts were fully developed (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). This methodology reflects best practices in the field, including Head and Cohen’s (2012) seminal study, which employed group and individual interviews with 19 young women about perceptions of CxCa prevention. Focus groups lasted over two hours, which provided an in-depth, robust...
conversation with small groups of women. Women between the ages of 18 and 19 attending a public university in an urban area in the Southeast region of the USA were eligible to participate in the study. Due to the importance of understanding the perceptions of the “catch-up” population, participants were purposively limited to ages 18-19, which includes first year students at highest risk of acquiring HPV (Brown et al., 2005). With participants’ permission, all focus groups were recorded and transcribed for accuracy.

A total of 18 college-age women participated in three focus groups. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 19 years, with a median age of 18. The majority of participants (72 percent; n = 13) identified as white/Caucasian, 17 percent (n = 3) identified as Black/African-American, and 11 percent (n = 2) identified as Hispanic/Latina. This demographic breakdown was representative of the public university that the participants attended. The majority of participants (61 percent; n = 11) had received the HPV vaccination. Among participants who had received the HPV vaccination, 100 percent had received all three shots. Only one participant did not know if she had received the HPV vaccination.

Interviews. In-depth interviews with key experts and stakeholders (n = 15) identified on-going and effective projects and initiatives addressing CxCa and HPV in South Carolina, USA. The campaign team conducted purposive sampling to recruit key experts and stakeholders who are currently involved in CxCa prevention and HPV vaccination awareness in South Carolina, USA (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Experts and stakeholders were identified based on their technical knowledge and experience in HPV and/or CxCa research, medical services, and/or programming (e.g. Harries et al., 2009). Participants included professors, health care providers, health educators, public health professionals, and advocates, including CxCa survivors.

Participants were primarily recruited at the CCFSC Inaugural Summit in January 2014. To ensure maximum variation in the sample, the campaign team reached out by e-mail to additional key stakeholders and conducted snowball sampling by asking participants to recommend other experts. This methodology is in line with other studies of CxCa and HPV vaccination, in which researchers interviewed 12-15 key informants, experts and stakeholders (e.g. Francis et al., 2013; Nodulman et al., 2015; Paul, 2016). The campaign team conducted 30 minute interviews at the Inaugural Summit or at a time and place convenient to the stakeholder. Participants provided informed consent at the start of each interview and all interviews were recorded for accuracy.

Tailoring: a theory-based approach to design effective messages
According to Noar (2006), novel and creative messages should be targeted to the audience segment in order to be effective. Messages were based on the HBM and understanding of the target audience. Cross-cutting findings revealed barriers, opportunities, and misinformation about HPV vaccination and CxCa screening, which informed the development of campaign messages. Specifically, the following findings from formative audience research guided the development of messages.

Perceived threat. Popular women’s magazines emphasized susceptibility to HPV and the severity of CxCa by using personal stories and facts to highlight the importance of the HPV vaccine in maintaining health. These magazines emphasized the effectiveness of the HPV vaccination and promoted its benefits. During focus group discussions, participants expressed concern about contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HPV. In other words, they felt susceptible to HPV. Specifically, many young women indicated that contracting a STI was one of their greatest health concerns. In addition to susceptibility, participants perceived the negative consequences of HPV (or any STI) to be severe. However, participants did not link HPV with CxCa and were not motivated by concerns about cancer. In other words, participants’ perceived susceptibility to CxCa was low.
While participants were aware of the HPV vaccine, they evidenced limited knowledge of HPV, prevention, screening, and vaccination.

**Benefits.** Many popular women’s magazines, such as *Vogue* and *Prevention*, offered accurate facts and tips to help women gain confidence and motivation to protect themselves from HPV. Despite limited knowledge about HPV and the HPV vaccine, focus group participants described the benefit of vaccination as protecting against a STI. While all of the experts acknowledged the focus on HPV vaccination as cancer prevention, some stakeholders emphasized the fact that HPV is a STI may be more persuasive among young people. Focus group participants suggested that including HPV vaccination in the routine immunization schedule could improve uptake. Stakeholder interviews reinforced the importance of HPV vaccination as part of the routine immunization schedule.

**Barriers.** Popular women’s magazines described the barriers to CxCa prevention, including time, transportation, and cost of HPV vaccination, which disproportionately impact underserved populations and women at highest risk of CxCa. All experts believed that it was essential for both boys and girls to get vaccinated at a young age before they were sexually active. All of the stakeholders emphasized studies demonstrating that HPV vaccination did not lead to increased sexual activity, addressing some of the barriers to HPV vaccination. Focus group participants described barriers and misunderstandings that might hinder their interest in obtaining the vaccination, including stigma and misconceptions, such as misinformation about vaccine safety and efficacy.

**Cues to action.** Popular women’s magazines described opportunities for CxCa prevention, including improving HPV vaccination rates by addressing disparities through cues to action, such as health care providers educating their patients about the vaccine and improving health communication campaigns about the issue. During focus group discussions, many participants described receiving the vaccine based on the advice of their health care provider. In addition, each of the stakeholders expressed the importance of understanding the target audience and being able to effectively communicate with them, especially through social media. Participants, who were often making their own health decisions for the first time, described using the internet to find information about HPV and the HPV vaccine to supplement a perceived lack of information from families and/or schools. Social media emerged as a particularly appropriate platform to reach the audience, including Facebook, Twitter, and Vine.

**#MyTime.** Based on the HBM and understanding of the target audience, the main campaign message, It’s My Time, encouraged the target audience to consider receiving the HPV vaccination so that they have time to pursue their dreams. Messages acknowledged the time that cancer steals from victims and how HPV vaccination and regular screening can give back that time, while allowing young women to live in the moment by protecting their future. The campaign logo incorporated the CCFSC logo in a clock with the numbers 1, 2, and 3, symbolizing the three HPV shots (see Figure 2). A secondary message, “the time is now/there’s still time,” reminded individuals that it is not too late to receive the HPV vaccination or take control of their health through appropriate screening. A tertiary message, “timing’s everything/on track and on time” emphasized sexual responsibility and reminded college-age women that it is important to receive all three shots of the HPV vaccine to prevent CxCa.

**Targeting (communication channels)**

Campaign implementation occurred between January 2014 and May 2014. The campaign included traditional media, new media, and an awareness event to reach college-age women. These strategies emerged from formative research. The campaign team strategically placed messages in communication channels that resonated with the target audience to increase the likelihood of a successful health communication campaign (Noar, 2006).
New media. The campaign team created and managed new media platforms to engage with key publics throughout the campaign period. The campaign team connected with the target audience through social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, and Vine. Twitter and Facebook were updated daily based on a thematic editorial calendar with posts including relevant news articles, pictures, and facts about CxCa incidence, symptoms, risk factors, and more. The campaign employed an innovative multimedia approach, which included using the hashtag #MyTime on social media sites, to reach young women. The campaign team created and shared infographics through social media to provide facts and statistics about CxCa and HPV prevention.

A central component of the new media strategy included a Vine video contest. To enter the contest, participants submitted a video that finished the sentence: “I received the HPV vaccine so that I have time to […]” “It’s My Time” appeared somewhere in the Vine to be eligible for prizes. Submissions included young women who received the HPV vaccine so that they have time to eat healthy, to do yoga, to go to graduate school, and to have movie nights with their friends. The winner of the contest received a 16GB iPod Nano with “#MyTime Cervical Cancer-Free South Carolina” engraved on the back to continue raising awareness of the campaign.

Traditional media. Public relations included community partner outreach, creating and disseminating materials, and hosting an awareness event. The campaign team developed a media kit, including a press release, feature release, buttons and a health education presentation for college students. These materials were distributed to media outlets and area businesses. Over 200 buttons were distributed to young women, health educators, and health care providers.

Traditional media was promoted online by the University’s Media Relations Team and News at the University, as well as numerous social media handles. The campaign included an awareness fair where trained volunteers provided information about the HPV vaccine,
answered questions about the vaccine and screening, and provided information about places to receive the vaccine and affordable options. The campaign team also participated in several on-campus events, including a “Singing for Sex” event and a Body Image Rally. These events were sponsored by University Student Health Services and Health Education to provide students with information about sexuality and sexual health. Specifically, the campaign team conducted peer-to-peer outreach and education, as well as engaged in dialogue and answered questions.

Bridging the gap between traditional and new media, the campaign team partnered with local businesses to display vinyl stickers featuring a QR code linking users to the CCFSC Twitter account (see Figure 3). These QR code stickers were distributed and featured in the windows of more than 20 local businesses, including restaurants and shops.

**Campaign evaluation and impact**

**Process evaluation.** Process evaluation includes measuring the implementation of the campaign, including the reach and frequency of message exposure (Noar, 2006). Campaign evaluation included social media analytics, such as number of posts, likes, shares, followers, etc. The campaign team tracked the Klout score for the campaign period. Klout uses social media analytics to provide a numerical value between 1 and 100 of online social influence. The Klout score increased by 31 points during the campaign indicating growing influence online.

**Outcome evaluation.** An anonymous web-based survey was designed for the purpose of evaluating the health communication campaign. Qualtrics online survey software was used to collect data. To minimize multiple attempts during the duration of the data collection period, each IP address was limited to one submission. Participants were recruited through new media, including e-mail and social media platforms. Women and men between the ages of 18 and 24 attending a public university in an urban area in the Southeast region of the United States were recruited.
USA were eligible to participate in the study. Participants provided electronic consent to access the questionnaire, which required approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey assessed campaign reach and evaluated strategies, messages, and communication channels. Based on the HBM, the survey investigated participants’ knowledge and opinions of the HPV vaccination and CxCa, information-seeking, and health behaviors. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze participant characteristics and item responses.

Overall, 237 completed surveys were collected. Of the participants, 88 percent were female and ages ranged from 18 to 29 years old. The majority of participants self-identified as white (91 percent) with 5 percent identifying as black or African-American. This demographic breakdown was representative of the public university that the participants attended. Overall, 60 participants (25 percent) indicated that they had not received the vaccine (or did not know). The majority of participants (59 percent) reported ever receiving a Pap test. Reinforcing messaging based on understanding of the target audience, participants strongly agreed that they were concerned about preventing genital warts (75 percent) and preventing an abnormal Pap test (70 percent), however, only 30 percent of participants strongly agreed that they were concerned about CxCa. As expected, a majority of participants learned about the HPV vaccine from friends and relatives (73 percent) and health care providers (58 percent). Mirroring the campaign’s approach to cues to action, a majority of participants learned about the HPV vaccine from social networking sites (63 percent) and most participants (70 percent) suggested social networking sites were one of the top three best ways to educate college students about these topics.

Among the participants, 63 percent had heard of CCFSC’s #MyTime Campaign. Approximately, 60 percent of respondents had seen It’s My Time campaign messages, including #MyTime and “[I received the HPV vaccine so that I have time to [...]” More than half of participants (53 percent) correctly identified the sponsor of these messages as CCFSC. Following the campaign, 93 percent of respondents had heard of the HPV vaccine. Among participants, 74 percent indicated that the HPV vaccine was somewhat successful or very successful at preventing CxCa. Approximately, 60 percent of participants believed that the It’s My Time Campaign was one of the top three best ways to educate college students about CxCa and the HPV vaccine. Participants primarily saw campaign messages on Facebook (86 percent), Twitter (79 percent), and Vine (78 percent). Based on campaign messages about CxCa, 70 percent of participants indicated that they considered getting a Pap test and 42 percent received a Pap test. In total, 60 percent of survey participants reported that they received the HPV vaccine because of It’s My Time campaign messages.

**Implications**

CxCa screening and HPV vaccination can reduce CxCa incidence and mortality, yet CxCa screening participation appears to be waning and uptake of HPV vaccination has lagged in the USA. The It’s My Time campaign provided an opportunity to promote CxCa screening and HPV vaccination among a population of college-age women in a state with higher than average CxCa incidence and mortality rates. Moreover, the results of this study have relevance throughout the USA and globally in areas experiencing similar trends and opportunities. The nationwide resonance of It’s My Time is evidenced by the campaign’s recognition for innovative multimedia communication strategies earning the top award in a national public health materials contest. The theory-based It’s My Time campaign was feasible to be implemented with college-age women and produced positive outcomes in HPV vaccination. As described, several successful strategies were used to inform the development and testing of the campaign, including employing the HBM, engaging with young people, and the novel use of social media. The synergy between these different strategies yielded a high quality product suitable for further dissemination.
The academic-community partnership with CCFSC was mutually beneficial in South Carolina, the USA and beyond. This type of field-based experiential learning offered students a variety of benefits, including simulated real-world experience, feedback from the community partner, and professional pieces to include in their individual portfolios. This partnership facilitated a successful peer-to-peer campaign strategy for CCFSC that would have been difficult to achieve without including students on the campaign team. This approach offered long-term benefits to students and faculty by strengthening the relationships between the university and the community. The campaign team followed the principles of effective health campaign design identified by Noar (2006). Students practiced the art and technique of health communication by designing, implementing, and evaluating a health communication campaign. This capstone course offered the rare longitudinal opportunity for students to contribute to each step of the campaign process.

The development of the It’s My Time campaign was guided by formative audience research and the HBM. The HBM provided a theoretical framework throughout data collection and analysis, as well as campaign implementation and evaluation. Specifically, this campaign supports the effectiveness of the HBM to address CxCa prevention, including HPV vaccine acceptability. In line with other studies, campaign strategies aimed to increase perceived severity, i.e., the negative consequences contracting HPV would have in a woman’s life, and increase perceived susceptibility, i.e., the likelihood of acquiring HPV (e.g. Cates et al., 2011; Frank et al., 2015; Macario and Matiella, 2015). Campaign messages incorporated college-age women pursuing their interests and dreams with the time they gained from preventing HPV and CxCa. This approach supports extant research that the impact of narrative messages is dependent on the perceived relevance of the storyline to the target audience (Frank et al., 2015).

This campaign employed unique strategies and tactics to engage young people. While most campaigns to increase HPV vaccination have targeted mothers, parents, and health care providers (e.g. Cates et al., 2011, 2014; Kennedy et al., 2011), It’s My Time built on growing momentum to target vaccine-eligible populations (Cohen et al., 2015; Cohen and Head, 2013; Frank et al., 2015; Hopfer, 2011; Krawczyk et al., 2012; Macario and Matiella, 2015; Sundstrom et al., 2015; Vanderpool et al., 2013). Formative audience research revealed concerns about STIs and limited knowledge of HPV, CxCa screening, and HPV vaccination. This study expands the HBM concept of perceived threat, which combines susceptibility and severity (Janz and Becker, 1984). Specifically, focus groups elaborated the role of limited knowledge and misinformation as components of perceived threat. Consistent with previously published studies, college-age women in this study indicated high levels of concern about acquiring STIs and low levels of HPV and CxCa screening knowledge (e.g. Allen et al., 2009; Cohen and Head, 2013; Krawczyk et al., 2012; Mills et al., 2013). These results supported the need for intervention and contributed to conceptualizing benefits and barriers in the HBM. Specifically, focus group participants explained that preventing cancer was not a motivating message (or benefit) to them, which factored in to the design of the #MyTime campaign. The underpinnings of the campaign linked to the notion of college students embracing their own time and time for themselves rather than dwelling on cancer risk-based messaging. This insight mirrors extant research, which found that messages emphasizing the prevention of genital warts, instead of cancer prevention, persuaded more young women to discuss HPV vaccination with a physician (Krieger and Sarge, 2013; Staggers et al., 2012).

The success of this campaign may be partially attributed to the academic-community approach to implementing a peer-based intervention developed collaboratively with health professionals (Bennett et al., 2012). Findings elaborated the HBM’s benefits and barriers by supporting existing research that the most effective messages to increase HPV vaccination among college-age women combine peer and medical expert narratives (Hopfer, 2011). Experts advocated for a community-based grassroots approach to addressing disparities in HPV vaccination and emphasized trust as a crucial strategy to engage with community partners.
Experts also reinforced the importance of HPV vaccination as part of the routine immunization schedule. All of the stakeholders described the importance of dispelling stigma and misconceptions, including misinformation about vaccine safety and demonstrating that HPV vaccination did not lead to increased sexual activity. This finding reinforces research that modifying barriers to HPV vaccination, including safety concerns, social norms, and lack of knowledge may be effective in changing behavior (Donadiki et al., 2014; Gerend and Shepherd, 2012).

Theory-based content analyses of news, magazines, and new media are often used for the purpose of developing messages and health communication campaign strategies. Cues to action, including external cues, such as mass media, are under researched components of the HBM (Carpenter, 2010; Cohen and Head, 2013). The results of this content analysis showed a high-level of visibility of HPV vaccination in mass media. This underscores the importance of the accuracy of such messages, particularly those aimed at a target population of college students. Despite this coverage in traditional media, the messaging does not seem to have effectively changed behavior given the limited knowledge seen in focus groups, as well as the nationwide plateau in vaccination rates (Elam-Evans et al., 2014). This finding elaborates the complex role of cues to action in the HBM, mirroring studies that found mass media contributes to ambiguity and misinformation about HPV vaccination (Cohen and Head, 2013; Mills et al., 2013).

This study also expands the role of cues to action in the HBM by incorporating an evidence-based approach to new media. Specifically, this study elaborates on the mechanism of cues to action on indirect effects, such as attitudes and beliefs (Gerend and Shepherd, 2012). In focus groups with college-age women, the role of new media was viewed favorably, and presented an opportunity to link intervention strategies to new media platforms. Few studies have utilized new media for CxCa screening and HPV vaccination with college students – or with any population – despite the tremendous potential for intervention reach and potential impact (e.g. Balatsoukas et al., 2015; Betsch, 2014; Gunasekaran et al., 2013; Maher et al., 2014; Krieger et al., 2013). Findings support scholars who have argued that new media platforms, such as Twitter, are among the most effective channels to reach young adults (Krawczyk et al., 2012).

The It’s My Time campaign integrated social media and traditional media strategies. In particular, disseminating a vinyl sticker with a QR code linked to CCFSC’s online presence bridged the social media gap. This approach supports the finding that new media, including Twitter and Facebook enhance the effectiveness of educational messages (Krawczyk et al., 2012; Merchant et al., 2014). A central campaign strategy, the video contest built on research that identified the potential of audience-generated messages to support successful health communication campaigns (Krieger et al., 2013). This successful peer-to-peer campaign strategy elaborated cues to action in the HBM and extended findings that plans to vaccinate among college-age women were strongly related to social norms and their peers’ HPV vaccination or intent to vaccinate (Allen et al., 2009; Hopfer and Clippard, 2010; Hopfer, 2011; Simmons et al., 2015).

The It’s My Time campaign was tested and evaluated. Notably, evaluation results showed modest penetration (~60 percent exposed) of the campaign on the college campus and surrounding community. Participants indicated high levels of intention to be vaccinated and/or seek CxCa screening in the future. Further, the format of the campaign was strongly supported by participants. However, there were several limitations to this study. Specifically, formative audience research included small sample sizes and lacked diversity in race/ethnicity and was taken from the student body of one university in the Southeast region of the USA. In addition, there were limitations of the campaign process based on constraints related to time, resources, and preparation. One academic year and a limited budget to design, implement, and evaluate a theory-based health communication campaign offered little room for error. To address this
limitation, professors might consider reaching out to students in the prior spring semester or
over the summer to begin planning formative research, which would allow a quicker start in
the Fall semester. Although prerequisites for the capstone course included research methods
and writing courses, students may not be prepared for the specific skills and tasks required to
direct formative research and implement a campaign. Creating web-based video lectures that
cover basic research and writing skills may relieve pressure from the professor to “re-teach”
these important skills during the course. The campaign was implemented over four months,
which offered little time to collect and analyze evaluation data. A more manageable campaign
implementation period of two months might be considered for this type of project.

The #MyTime campaign targeted a population in flux between dependency on parents
and asserting individual autonomy during the college years. This is a formative period.
While less than ideal for HPV vaccination, there is a window of opportunity to encourage
those in the catch-up population who were not vaccinated prior to college to seek vaccination
up to age 26. For many female college students, CxCa screening will begin during the college
years (i.e. age 21). Targeting college students during this transitional and formative period can
increase awareness and knowledge and promote cancer prevention.

Conclusion
In order to realize the public health goal of eradicating CxCa, innovations such as HPV
vaccination and CxCa screening must remain relevant. This study showed high visibility of
HPV vaccination in popular media. Focus groups with college-age women revealed concerns
about acquiring STIs juxtaposed with limited knowledge of HPV, CxCa screening, and HPV
vaccination. Stakeholders offered contextual information about the landscape of CxCa
screening and HPV vaccination in South Carolina, USA and beyond. Findings elaborated the
HBM and explicated this theoretical framework throughout campaign development,
implementation, and evaluation. The It’s My Time campaign messages focused on simple
steps to ensure future health – not only cancer prevention – by taking steps today to have time
to do something personally gratifying. This paper offers practical suggestions to campaign
planners about building academic-community partnerships to develop theory-based
communication campaigns that include conducting formative research, segmenting target
audiences, engaging with young people, and incorporating social media.

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Applying the health belief model to prevent CxCa
Further reading


About the authors

Beth Sundstrom is an Associate Professor of Communication and Public Health at the College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA. Beth Sundstrom is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: bsundstrom@gmail.com

Heather M. Brandt is the Associate Dean for Professional Development and an Associate Professor in the Arnold School of Public Health and Statewide Cancer Prevention and Control Program at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA.

Lisa Gray is a family Nurse practitioner at Evans Army Community Hospital in Fort Carson, Colorado. Jennifer Young Pierce is a Gynecologic Oncologist, Professor of Interdisciplinary Clinical Oncology, and the Leader of Cancer Control and Prevention at the USA Mitchell Cancer Institute, University of South Alabama.

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How focusing positively on errors can help organizations become more communicative

An alternative approach to crisis communication

Charlotte Simonsson and Mats Heide
Department of Strategic Communication, Lunds Universitet, Lund, Sweden

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to gain new knowledge of how organizational errors can be used to early detect signals of impending crises and thereby develop internal crisis communication. Three communication processes – organizational culture, leadership and learning – that are particularly important for the development of internal crisis communication are focused. The paper also discusses what kind of learning error management supports, and suggests how crisis communication as a practice can be developed. The thesis is that intensified work of improving internal crisis communication is a vital step of becoming a communicative organization, where all coworkers are understood and act as strategic communicators.

Design/methodology/approach – This empirical study is part of a three-year research project on internal crisis communication within a Swedish university hospital. This paper is based on a sub-study with 37 qualitative semi-structured interviews with nurses, physicians, managers and crisis management specialists within the hospital.

Findings – The paper offers knowledge about how internal crisis communication can be developed by focusing on errors as resource to anticipate a crisis and as material for organizational learning. Coworkers are mainly focused in the article and are seen as important sources and strategic communicators. It is further emphasized that error management is not a matter of technological solutions, but rather a question of communicative aspects of leadership and organizational culture.

Practical implications – It is suggested that initiatives to develop internal crisis communication is an important step for organizations in becoming communicative organizations, and communication professionals have an important role to facilitate this development.

Originality/value – This paper gives a new understanding of internal crisis communication and the importance of leadership and culture.

Keywords Leadership, Internal communication, Organizational culture, Crisis communication

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A growing critique of traditional crisis communication research is a one-sided focus on external aspects such as response strategies, image repair and external stakeholder relations (e.g. Frandsen and Johansen, 2017; Johansen et al., 2012; Mazzei et al., 2012; Taylor, 2010). Traditional crisis communication research is based on a modernist, rationalistic ideal, where a crisis is often understood as a result of external threats. This research has offered typologies to identify different form of crises (Coombs, 2015; Seeger et al., 2003) that are believed to develop through set phases (cf. Fink, 1986). Another characteristic of the traditional research is a rather exclusive focus on the acute crisis phase, while pre-crisis and post-crisis phases are investigated less often. Further, a clear goal of traditional research is communication with external stakeholders, aiming to reset organizational trust and legitimacy. Going beyond the strong concentration on external dimensions of crisis communication and studying what happens inside an organization, it is necessary to develop the field of crisis communication further and gain a deeper understanding of crisis communication. To go beyond the areas and foci of traditional research in crisis communication, there is a need to take an alternative, social constructionist perspective (cf. Heide and Simonsson, 2015). This perspective puts
sensemaking in the center, and emphasizes that social reality, such as an organization, is produced through interaction and communication. Consequently, when humans strive to make sense of situations and incidents, they co-produce a social reality.

In this paper, we argue that strategic initiatives and work with internal crisis communication constitute a profound way for an organization to become a communicative organization. This rather new concept, that has attracted much attention from researchers and practitioners, acknowledges the fundamental aspect of communication in the constant enacting processes of organizing. An important aspect of the communicative organization is that it widens the understanding of strategic communication as a practice that involves all organizational members, not only communication professionals (Falkheimer et al., 2017; Heide and Simonsson, 2015; Zerfass and Franke, 2013). Internal crisis communication is consequently something that incorporates all organizational members as organizational ambassadors, sensemakers and resources in the management of crisis (see Heide and Simonsson, 2016; Strandberg and Vigsø, 2016).

We concentrate on one fundamental part of internal crisis communication, anticipation, and especially on error management, which is a communicative process and activity that has seldom been acknowledged (cf. Leonardi, 2017). One explanation is the wide-spread belief in error-free organizations which per se is an anomaly. The dominating managerialism discourse in organizations seems to affirm a form of idealized rationalism (Simon, 1957). Such discourse reinforces a belief in the rational man (sic!) that can always deliver optimal solutions, which leads to an understanding of failures and near-misses as something shameful or something that must be covered up (Turner, 1994). A more rewarding approach is to regard errors as valuable learning opportunities. As much as 80 percent of organizational crisis does not happen suddenly, but develops slowly, and there are almost always weak signals of an imminent crisis. Research in both organizational psychology and management has for a long time concluded that errors are a natural part of organizational life: “Human beings, in all lines of work, make errors” (Kohn, Corrigan, and Donaldson, 2000, p. ix). Hence, errors are inevitable in organizations where humans act and interact.

The paper is based on a three-year research project of internal crisis communication at a Swedish university hospital (UH) (Heide and Simonsson, 2014, 2015, 2016). One sub-study in the project, that is reported here, focuses on errors as resources for learning and avoidance of larger crises. Errors are common in organizations, but healthcare organizations are regarded as high reliability organization (HRO) (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007), and they have a particular interest in avoiding crises since crises may have catastrophic consequences in the form of death and human suffering. Despite crisis-avoiding cultures at hospitals, a study demonstrates that medical errors cause almost 100,000 deaths a year in US hospitals (Kohn et al., 2000). The report from the Institute of Medicine (2000) served as a watershed event since it showed that medical errors were not linked to technical issues but rather to patient safety mismanagement. Since this report was published, improvement in patient safety has become a mantra in healthcare organizations. One significant way to improve patient safety is error reporting. Its target is to register errors, facilitate learning from failures and reduce future errors, and thereby improve patient safety.

The aim of this paper is to gain new knowledge of how organizational errors can be used to detect signals of impending crises at an early stage and thereby develop internal crisis communication. We will highlight three processes – organizational culture, leadership and learning – that are particularly important for the development of internal crisis communication. We will also discuss what kind of learning error management supports, and suggest how crisis communication as a practice can be developed. The thesis is that intensified work of improving internal crisis communication is a vital step of becoming
a communicative organization, where all coworkers are understood and act as strategic communicators. We believe that communication professionals have an important role in communicating, but managers and coworkers constitute the largest part of an organization’s strategic communication, for instance in service encounters and in communication with suppliers and politicians. In such meetings, the organization as a social construction is produced and reproduced.

First, a discussion of the communicative organization and then a review of error management and a presentation of two vital theories in crisis management is given below. This section is followed by a presentation of how the empirical material was collected and analyzed. The third section presents the analysis and finally, in the last section, we discuss some conclusions.

**Theory**
From a social constructionist approach, a crisis is understood as complex, integrated, processual phenomena that often demands improvisation and polyvocal responses. Two researchers that advocate this approach are Gilpin and Murphy (2008), who authored the influential book *Crisis Communication in a Complex World*. They emphasize the role of sensemaking by organizational members, while crisis situations are occasions where the rational, orderly system collapses. In such situations, organizational members experience ambiguity, confusion and disorientation (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). An inherent value of the social constructionist perspective is that communication is understood as a sensemaking process, where meaning is produced in interactions between humans (cf. Weick, 1969). Communication here is not seen as a simple medium of information, but as the very mean that produces and reproduces the social reality. In relation to crisis, this reasoning implies that organizational members’ sensemaking of a crisis situation influences their understanding, and thereby their behavior and actions (Heide and Simonsson, 2015).

Internal crisis communication is a field within crisis communication research which has been somewhat ignored, as has already been pointed out by other researchers (e.g. Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Taylor, 2010). To some extent, this can be explained by the fact that most researchers in crisis communication have their heritage in public relations, and thereby focus on external aspects of organizations’ communication. Internal crisis communication can be defined as “the communicative interaction among managers and employees, in a private or public organization, before, during and after an organizational or societal crisis” (Johansen et al., 2012, p. 271). Hence, organizational members are both receivers of information and senders of information in communication with different stakeholders in the acute crisis phase. Further, organizational members are also an important resource in the pre-crisis phase, since they can detect and, in best cases, prevent a crisis materializing. Organizational members have long tentacles and expertise within their areas and in an early phase can easily detect weak warning signals of negative change (Heide and Simonsson, 2015). This aspect is called anticipation, and is a relatively overlooked aspect of internal crisis communication (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Wildavsky (1988) who introduced anticipation to the social sciences and defines it as “a mode of control by a central mind; efforts are made to predict and prevent potential danger before damage is done” (p. 77). Anticipation involves detecting risks, reporting failures, near failures and miscommunication that may develop into a larger crisis, and is a fundamental part of the strategic, proactive and processual perspective on crisis communication (cf. Frandsen and Johansen, 2017).

Related to anticipation is error management. There has recently arisen greater interest in organizational errors and rare events as a resource (e.g. Christianson et al., 2009; Goodman et al., 2011; Hunter et al., 2011; Sutcliffe, 2011). Feedback from coworkers is one of the best resources for a warning system and the information can be used wisely for
organizational development (cf. Bisel and Arterburn, 2012). Every little error that individual coworkers make is not in itself a threat or a potential risk to an organization, but the combination of many small errors can lead to severe consequences and even to an organizational crisis (cf. Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Perrow (1984) claims that almost 70 percent of all accidents involve human errors. It is therefore rather common that individuals are blamed when mistakes are made. Nevertheless, Reason (1990) stresses that most errors in organizations are caused by a complex chain of events and represent system errors. An example of a contemporary description of organizational errors is “the actions of multiple organizational participants that deviate from organizationally specified rules and procedures and that can potentially result in adverse outcomes for the organization” (Goodman et al., 2011, p. 153). Another definition is offered by Hofmann and Frese (2011, p. 3) who argue that actions are “erroneous when they unintentionally fail to achieve their goal if this failure was potentially avoidable.” Organizational actions can therefore only be labeled as errors when there is a goal to relate to the consequences. A related concept is risk, but this is not a synonym for error. While error is something that has a potential to be avoidable, risk is rather an intrinsic part of a situation and can be analyzed before action is initiated (Hofmann and Frese, 2011).

In the traditional crisis management literature, organizational errors are seen as something entirely negative, even though error-free organizations should be considered as a chimera (Clarke, 1999). Festinger (1950) maintains that all development is a product of human failures. Hence, errors can also have a positive and constructive approach and result in organizational learning (van Dyck et al., 2005). In organizations where error management is imbued with a positive approach towards errors, the potential for error detection and learning is much bigger. Organizational learning can be understood as a process when coworkers revise their beliefs, and they then improve the performance of an organization (Huber, 2004). The new knowledge produces new response repertoires that prepare an organization’s capabilities to handle a future, similar situation (Christianson et al., 2009), and thereby reduce the risk of future crises.

An important concept in this context is organizational culture. This was very popular in the 1980s and 1990s among both academics and practitioners, and it was often understood as one of the most important factors of organizational success. Even if organizational culture is seen today from a more sober perspective, it is still important for commitment, prioritization and resource allocation. Culture could be described as “what stands behind and guides behavior rather than the behavior as such (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2016, p. 42). There has been great emphasis on micro issues in healthcare literature, such as reducing errors, but macro issues as organizational culture and leadership must also be taken into account (Ruchlin et al., 2004). Otherwise there is an impending risk that no learning takes place at overall organization level. At least two comprehensive theories on errors at macro level can be identified: the normal accident theory (NAT) and the high-reliability organization theory (HROT). NAT originates from Perrow’s (1984) work and focuses on the complexity of systems and coupling between parts of a system. Perrow emphasizes that it is impossible to avoid accidents in complex, tightly coupled systems, and that error-prevention systems make the system even more complex and will increase the risk of more errors and accidents. The solution is accordingly to make organizations loosely coupled and independent. HROT stresses organizational culture of reliability where coworkers focus, discuss and reflect on risk and near misses. The main argument is that successful organizations have great potentials and abilities to learn from past mistakes, which is an effect of a safety culture.

Organizational cultures in HROs are characterized by a high degree of flexibility and learning orientation (Ruchlin et al., 2004; Sutcliffe, 2011). Other important aspects of organizations that work successfully with error reporting are reporting without the all too common “naming, shaming, and blaming,” open discussion about errors, statistical analysis
of error data, education and training programs, and system redesign (Stock et al., 2006). The most characteristic feature of HROs is the expectancy of errors and that coworkers are trained to identify, learn, adapt and reorganize from errors, and do not isolate failures but strive to learn and generalize from them (Reason, 2000). It is a great challenge to realize and accept that an error-free world does not exist and that perfection is impossible to achieve (Ruchlin et al., 2004). In all organizations, different mental models of how things should be run develop over time, and these create inertia against reconsideration when new and contradictory information is presented. The rationale is that people act and react on their perceptions and sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Initiatives to detect errors are effectively reduced in organizations where coworkers are punished for making errors or blamed, and where errors are swept under the carpet and not discussed openly (van Dyck et al., 2005). In such organizations errors will be suppressed, the same errors will continue to happen repeatedly while no learning takes place, and there is a great likelihood that severe accidents and crises will evolve. There is also a problem with error detection that is too effective – there will be less material and errors to learn from and develop new strategies and actions. In other words, the learning potential will be less (Sitkin, 1996). On the other hand, rapid error detection is vital for minimizing the risk of a large crisis evolving and people getting hurt.

HRO as a concept has considerable parallels with “the communicative organization” in the understanding of organizational members as organizational resources, and they are both based in social constructionist perspective. The communicative organization was launched by the Global Alliance in 2010 at the 6th World Public Relations Forum. Even though the concept has become rather popular among practitioners, there is no generally applicable definition, it is often related to well-functioning communication between an organization and its publics, internal and external, which will gain persistent competitive advantage (cf. Nothhaft and von Platen, 2015). The communicative organization could also include overall knowledge and awareness of the importance of communication for continuous organizing processes that enact and reproduce an organization (Falkheimer et al., 2016). In communicative organizations, there is a general understanding that all organizational members are strategic communicators that produce and reproduce an organization. Hence, communication is continuously on the agenda in communicative organizations, and organizational processes and activities are assessed and understood from a communicative perspective. A related concept is communicative leadership (Hamrefors, 2010; Hamrin, 2016; Johansson et al., 2011), which could be defined in the following way: “A communicative leader is one who engages employees in dialogue, actively shares and seeks feedback, practices participative decision-making, and is perceived as open and involved” (Johansson et al., 2011, p. 3). Communicative leadership is a narrower concept than communicative organization, and it only focuses on leaders, their behavior and communication, not the whole organization.

Method
In line with our social constructionist approach, we conducted a qualitative study, since our philosophy of science is based on social constructionism. Our research aim has been to understand how organizational members perceive, understand and make sense of different situations, phenomena and incidents. Further, knowledge is socially produced and reproduced in communication (cf. Dewey, 1916/2004), which implies that a qualitative method is suitable for the study of a complex phenomenon such as internal crisis communication and error reporting.

The study reported in this paper is part of a three-year research project on internal crisis communication within a UH in Sweden. The hospital is rather new, it is founded in January 2010 after a merger between two hospitals in two different cities. This merger was rather
sudden, and consequently heavily debated both within the organization and in the mass media and social media. The hospital is part of a larger public, politically governed, organization with several different organizations such as health and medical services, growth and development, public transport, and culture within the southern region of Sweden. UH has 11,000 employees and is a highly complex, multi-professional organization.

Among several aspects, we chose UH as a study object since it was in the middle of a major organizational change process when we conducted the study. Further, the large size of the organization, its complexity both in structure and operation plus the turbulent situation made many potentials for organizational crises. During the study, several potential and actual crises occurred, such as patient safety issues, trust crises, internal conflicts, technical errors, and so on. In other words, the studied organization is an extreme case, which is often an advantage since it gives possibilities to collect rich information about an investigated phenomenon (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006). A more average and “normal” organization would not give the same possibilities to study different forms of crisis at the same time. Even though the studied organization is an extreme case, we are certain that the results are valid for other organizations through analytical generalizations (Tsang and Williams, 2012). It is here also relevant to discuss the matter of generalizability that still seems to be an important issue for many researchers (Tsoukas, 2009). However, already in the 1930s, the well-known philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958) condemned the substantial craving for generalizability and the contemptuous attitude towards the single case as a source of knowledge. Instead of talking about (statistical) generalizability, Tsoukas (2009) pinpoints that it is more appropriate to use the term analytical generalization when the researcher generalizes the results from a single case to a broader theory. Some researchers, like Yin (2014) consider that the unique case could be seen as a manifestation of the general. This reasoning is criticized by Tsoukas (2009) who is of the opinion that we should pay as much attention to the uniqueness of every single case as to the general patterns. We agree with Tsoukas and are assured that there is a lot to learn from single, specific cases. This case is in Sweden, but we are convinced that the results of this research are applicable to other, international organizations. There might be differences in culture and leadership styles in different countries but there are also differences in different organizations in a single country. Further, we believe that the analytical generalization per se makes the results useful in other cultural contexts.

In this paper, we present one part of this broader project that is focused on error management. We have carried out a total of 37 semi-structured interviews with nurses, physicians, managers and crisis management specialists within the hospital. These interviewees were chosen through a theoretical sampling strategy, which implies that they were selected on basis of experience of, and knowledge in, the subject of the study (Patton, 2015). We also wanted to cover both the administrative and medicine staff at the hospital, and especially those with responsibility and experience of crisis management and crisis communication. Since we did not have knowledge or insight in the case organization, we asked the contact person, i.e. the communication director, to select interviewees according to our specification. Our strategy was to interview representatives of different occupations with various backgrounds and experience in crisis, crisis management and crisis communication. Based on theoretical sampling, we conducted a close-up study of the emergency department at the hospital, and conducted interviews with nurses and physicians. The emergency department was selected since it is a very information-rich case – crises happen, more or less, every day and consequently the staff has a lot of experience in handling crises. The use of the contact person was an advantage when it comes to legitimatizing the study and getting access. Our contact person, for her part, used other organizational members with knowledge of specific parts of the organization to select relevant interviewees. These organizational members were informed of the study by the
contact person, and she also provided them with a document about the project that they were asked to distribute to the intended interviewees. In the document, we presented ourselves, the study and the research project on internal crisis communication, and guaranteed them full anonymity. We acknowledge that we did not have total control of the sampling process, but we had no other realistic strategy to get access to the staff. There might be a biased sampling with interviewees that were positive or talkative. However, in the analysis we could not discover any pattern of bias; we were given many outspoken and critical statements. Apart from interviewees that the contact person arranged, suitable interviewees were suggested to us during the interviews. We contacted these potential interviewees, and gave them the same information about the project.

The interview was structured with prepared questions organized into different themes. We encouraged the interviewees to develop relevant sub-themes and discuss their own experiences and interests related to the themes in the interview guide (Alvesson, 2011). As we learned more about the organization and the different problem areas, we changed and improved the interview guide and used the new knowledge in the interviews. We initiated the interviews with more general questions about the organization, perceptions of crisis, previous experience of crisis management and crisis communication, opinions of crisis-preparedness documents and ideas of how internal communication functions in “normal” situations and specifically in times of crisis situations. Examples of questions are “How would you like to define crisis?”, “What happens after an error has occurred?”, “What does a meeting look like when you discuss deviations and errors?”, and, “what importance does informal communication have in relation to organizational crises?”. When we entered a new theme in the interview guide, we started with open, broader questions, that Jones (1996) calls “grand-tour” questions. This gave the interviewees the opportunity to give spontaneous accounts of how they interpreted the theme (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014).

Each interview took between one and one and a half hour and was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Most of the interviews were conducted by one of the researchers with one interviewee but we also conducted focus group interviews with nurses at the emergency department due to schedule technical reasons. The transcribed interviews were read and re-read several times to detect patterns and themes. We further analyzed the empirical material with a reflexive pragmatist approach in mind, which means that our ambition was to challenge given interpretations without losing direction towards the goal (Alvesson, 2011).

Result and analysis
At UH, there is an error reporting system (a database), which coworkers are supposed to use whenever there has been a deviation from the normal. The official definition of a deviation in this context is “when a patient has been or could have been harmed.” After an employee has written an error report it goes either to a quality coordinator (QC) and then to the nearest manager or directly to the nearest manager. In the case of a serious error or incident, an analysis of the incident is made by nurses being appointed as investigators. If needed, the physician with the medical responsibility is also included in the investigation. If no further analysis is needed, the person who has done the report is just given some written feedback published in the database.

Below follows a discussion on the error reporting system at UH from a cultural, leadership and learning perspective.

Organization culture and communication
Organizational culture is often argued to be a primary driver of safety and error reduction (Ruchlin et al., 2004; Stock et al., 2006; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). We have therefore tried to find out what ideas nurses, physicians and other employees hold about error reporting, what values and beliefs surround error reporting, whose errors are reported by whom, and so forth.
Stock et al. (2006, p. 375) claim that one critical success factor is to move towards a culture that encourages reporting errors openly and without blame. The interviews strongly confirm this idea, and several of the interviewees argue repeatedly that a previous blame-culture is gradually disappearing:

When serious things happen, we must not hush up, “ooh this might be difficult” [...] No, we must bring it to the surface, so that you play it down and focus on the actual system errors. It is only then the individual in the event can feel a bit safer. We do not want to hunt the individual with a blowtorch. We are not there to achieve 100 percent, but we are working on it (Quality coordinator).

As indicated in the quote above, a crucial driver in getting away from an accusation culture is to differentiate between the person and the system/process/situation. As noted above, it is quite clear that managers and other key persons try to create the idea that it is not persons who make errors, but the system. However, as one of the managers argues, it is not always easy to separate:

We have talked a lot about why errors are reported. It is not about accusing someone, it can be something in the situation that was the reason[...] But sometimes you can feel that it is connected to a person, it is a nurse who has given the wrong medication. But if you investigate it further, you often find that it was a very hectic evening and so on. There are often many reasons why a patient was given the wrong medication (Manager).

The emphasis on openness and on errors as connected to the system rather than to individuals show that UH has adopted important HRO-principles. At the same time, there are some nurses who think that the tough environment at the emergency department has produced a “questioning culture” and lack of trust among the employees. One nurse said:

We are fairly good at questioning each other. “Why are you doing that?” “Have you followed the routine?” I think that this endless questioning has escalated. The jargon is hard here, and it feels like colleagues want to set you up.

It should also be noted that the actual error reporting behavior, e.g. who reports errors and whose errors are reported, indicates that the idea of error reporting as a tipping system still exists to some extent. According to the interviewees, most error reports are about errors that employees at other department have made and the interviewees see it as a sign of rivalry within the hospital. “You don’t often write a report on your closest colleagues or yourself. You don’t want to denounce a colleague,” said one nurse.

It is also interesting to note that physicians are said to report considerably fewer errors than do nurses and nursing assistants. Some mention that there are practical reasons for this pattern; physicians simply do not know how to write a report since they have not had any training in how to operate the actual IT system. Other interviewees argue that there are cultural aspects which explain the low levels of error report among physicians:

Physicians are special. They are extremely collegial. They would never criticize or report each other’s errors. All physicians in Sweden regard each other as colleagues (Manager).

Thus, physicians tend to identify with their profession and are regarded by nurses as a closed “brotherhood.” They have their own meetings where they discuss different issues and problems. In sum, there exist two parallel staff cultures at the hospital, which also make the work with error reporting and learning difficult. Even so, some argue that physicians at the emergency department report errors more often than physicians at other departments. Some interviewees also claim that the culture at the emergency department is less hierarchical than at other departments, which can be one explanation for this pattern (cf. Kim et al., 2012).

The difference between nurses and physicians is also a matter of power. Physicians have, in general, a higher status and consequently more room for maneuver. Earlier research confirms this difference. Fagin and Garelick (2004, p. 282) note: “[n]urses have to prove their
competence in every interaction with physicians, whereas doctors’ competencies are assumed and it is their fallibility and shortcomings that have to be proved.” The power aspect of organizational learning has recently become an import issue that is discussed by the research community. Collien (2017), who has reviewed research on organizational learning from a power perspective, emphasizes that power and dominance structures are often maintained in micro-level learning processes. For example, coworkers or managers can use micro-politics to strategically obstruct organization learning, if it does not support their interests. This seems to be the case at the UH, where power produces a problematic sub-optimizing for the organization.

Leadership and communication

Good leadership has been found to be linked to an increased level of learning and willingness to speak up (cf. Kim et al., 2012). As Kim and Newby-Bennett (2012) argue, “this does not mean that good leaders increased errors; instead, they created a non-threatening environment that prompted employees to speak openly about errors instead of hiding them” (p. 160). The interviewees confirm the vital role of leaders, which one the interviewees expressed in the following way:

Our hospital does not have a good error reporting culture in general. It varies a lot between different units. If the management team encourages you to write error reports, and also wants you to suggest improvements[…] and if you also have the full loop with regular feedback – then, you have a god culture (Nurse).

All employees have a responsibility to report errors that have been made, and also risks or deficits that can influence patient safety. However, there are no sanctions if you do not report errors, which mean that error reporting to some extent can be seen as optional:

Within the airline industry there are consequences if you don’t report. You risk a warning and so forth. But here there are no consequences for the individual if you don’t follow the regulations and report errors. That is part of our problems[…] (Head doctor).

Furthermore, the interviews indicate that the responsibility and role of each manager in terms of error management are not very specific. Considering that UH is a very large, complex and to some extent heterogeneous organization, this quite loose form of organization and absence of sanctions and strict rules, can be both necessary and advantageous. Nevertheless, the lack of sanctions and clear rules make the role of each manager even more important – not least when it comes to the attitude of error reporting among employees, creating an open communication climate and forums for discussing errors and giving feedback.

The way of organizing and managing the error reporting system varies between different divisions and clinics. In some units, it is the managers who are responsible for the whole process of error reporting, but in other units, there are also QCs who have a specialized and coordinating role for several clinics. Until quite recently, the emergency division had a full-time QC who had an overall responsibility for error management within several units of the division. The person who held that position is described as a true enthusiast who meant a lot for developing a positive error reporting culture and increasing the actual number of reports. Some of the interviewees also think that the QC was able to do better investigations and assessments; as an external she could see new aspects of an incident and since she was not a manager she was not seen as a “threat”. The QC could also interpret data from several departments and discover recurrent problems and broader patterns, i.e. having an overall perspective, contributing to learning between different units. However, this does not mean that the managers are not important, but that the QC was an important support for the managers, who have lot of other responsibilities.
The managers within the emergency department that have been interviewed seem to strive for an open climate, stressing that it is not persons who are to blame but the system or the organization. The interviewed coworkers also confirm that they are encouraged to write error reports. Recurrent or more serious errors are discussed at various kinds of staff meetings, which contribute to an open climate and enhance learning. However, both managers and coworkers seem to think that lack of feedback on reported errors is something that needs to be further developed. One team leader reflects upon the importance of feedback:

Our challenge as employer representatives is to give feedback to the staff when they have written an error report. I think that some employees feel that they write error report after error report, but nothing happens, and then it becomes useless. So, feedback is everything. Otherwise, people get tired of reporting. We have improved our feedback, but we should be even better at it.

Some interviewees claim that it can take months until you get some feedback, which not only means reduced motivation but also less possibilities to make a good investigation. Others argue that often some kind of default response is given, which also hampers motivation. Increasing pressure on the staff to do more with less resources also seems to have a negative effect on error reporting. High pressure means less time to write error reports, and also that employees make more mistakes and errors, which seems to give rise to resignation when it comes to error management. The nurses that we have interviewed said that there are errors to report after every single work shift, but they do not have sufficient time to report. One nurse argues that when crisis is the normal situation, it is hard to see a deviation or an error.

Organizational learning and communication

Research confirms that communication is a root cause for as much as 70 percent of errors in healthcare organizations (see Weaver et al., 2011). The employees at UH also share this perception; the head doctor at UH explained: “Miscommunication is a red thread in almost all serious healthcare errors and accidents. In the healthcare sector, we are rather unclear in our communication, and start guessing what probably was meant.” Communication is thus a major source of errors, but it is also the most important tool for reflection and learning (Weick and Ashford, 2001). According to the literature, communication and an open communication climate are prerequisites for error-detection and learning. Without communication among coworkers there will not be any shared reflections, sensemaking, experience exchange and learning when new knowledge is produced. It is therefore important that leaders at the emergency focus on error reporting and discuss the most important reports with the staff. Through such discussions, experience is shared and new knowledge produced.

At the emergency, there are several formal meetings where errors are discussed. There are three, short “pulse”-meetings every day when the different work shifts changes. The outgoing shift informs the incoming shift about what has happened during their shift, and these meetings thus make it possible to share experience and knowledge. The team leaders also call the staff to monthly workplace meetings, where a standing discussion point is errors. Different problems or challenges are discussed and the team leaders emphasize that they want the coworker to deliver the solutions. Before the merger between the two UHs there was a strong focus on implementing the ideas of lean management or lean healthcare. The work to implement and work according to the principles of lean management gradually faded when all the energy was put into the merger process. However, the emergency department will soon start a new project using “improvement bulletin boards”, which is clearly in line with lean principles. The coworkers will have short daily, improvement meetings and discuss how problems can be solved and errors avoided.
The interviews also indicate that learning mainly takes place in informal communication between coworkers, for example, by trying to solve problems directly. The staff take their own initiative to find better solutions and routines when problems appear. A nurse explained “We improvise a lot and directly take care of problems that arise.” This kind of learning is often efficient, but the learning tends to be quite local, limited to a specific work group. The head doctor at UH thinks that an important effect of this kind of learning is that only vital errors will be reported in the system, since more simple problems are taken care of directly. Further, it seems that the learning focus is on rather basic things such as new routines, while value or norm breaking reflections are not very common. On the other hand, since many large crises are products of small changes and errors, action taken to correct small problems just as they happen is wise from a crisis management perspective (cf. Christianson et al., 2011).

As discussed above, a problem in an organization as large and complex as a UH, is that learning tends to be productive only in small units and in informal groups, but learning between units is problematic (Heide, 2002). Our interviewees cannot recall having been given experience or knowledge produced in other departments. One team leader emphasized that learning exchange between departments is difficult. On various occasions initiatives had been taken to discuss errors between several departments, but the discussions were unsuccessful and ended up in “custard-pie throwing”. Vertical knowledge sharing at UH is also problematic. The total amount of errors reported on an aggregated level equals at least 10,000 a year. These are errors that QCs and managers in the organization have coded as important for the whole organization, but the reported errors cannot be analyzed and used for organizational learning purposes. The head doctor shrugged his shoulders and said “What can we do with 10,000 errors. It is impossible for us at the top level to analyze them. It is a total mess.”

A problem at the UH emergency is employee turnover, which is high; some employees stay for only three months, while the majority stay a couple of years. One nurse told us: “many errors can be solved with new and better routines, but it becomes problematic when there is a constant flow of new coworkers. This means that new teaches new.” An additional problem is the three-shift system that makes it difficult to share ideas, experience, new routines and knowledge among the coworkers. Christianson et al. (2011) emphasize that healthcare organizations have certain characteristics that make it difficult to adapt to the ideas of HRO: continuous demands to reduce cost and increase efficiency tend to dismiss the focus on safety, shifting workforces, temporary teams and job rotations obstruct learning and error reducing, and the high demands on the staff to take action to save life means that there is not sufficient time to reflect or collect information before handling. Another challenge involves the physicians who are employed at other departments, and only work at the emergency during a certain period. There is not yet an emergency specialization for physicians, and the emergency has no permanent physicians on the staff. The physicians are regularly guests at the department, and this does hamper the ambition to improve organization learning.

Conclusions
In this paper, we have focused on anticipation and especially on error management as part of internal crisis communication processes, and we provide a detailed account of organizational processes of detecting errors by coworkers and their perception and understanding of those processes. By seeing errors in a positive way, there is a great opportunity for organizations to learn and to prevent crises. The study illustrates the complex organizational nature, and that crisis prevention builds as much on organizational members as on the communication department, which is in line with the communicative organization thesis. We believe this knowledge contributes to a better understanding of signal detection, crisis perception and crisis learning.
The UH that we have studied has a special IT system for error reporting. There seems to be a continuous development of this system in order to make it more encompassing and easier to categorize different types of error. At the same time, it is obvious from this study that it is not the technical tool that is most crucial and challenging, but the communicative aspects of leadership and organizational culture.

Several researchers (e.g. Stock et al., 2006) stress the importance of organizational culture in order to obtain a reduction of medical errors. An important part of this culture is preoccupation with failures and an open climate where employees feel safe to report and discuss errors (cf. Hunter et al., 2011; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). If leaders do not work actively to encourage an open and reflective communication climate, there is an impending risk that errors are accepted, taken-for-granted, and a climate of silence developing as a result of collective sensemaking (cf. Morrison and Milliken, 2000). In organizations where coworkers are aware of and acknowledge that errors happen frequently and continuously, there are better prerequisites for error detection, reporting and learning (Hofmann and Frese, 2011). The leaders have thus an important function as facilitators of error reporting. It is essential to have a strong and manifest leadership where errors are emphasized as important sources for the development of the organization. Failures and errors are definitely at the top of the agenda in the UH that we have studied. According to the interviewees, the idea of error reporting as a way of complaining and accusing colleagues is not dominant any more – even if hierarchical and cultural differences between nurses and physicians still exist. A key driver in this increased openness is a meta-message that it is the system or the organization that makes errors, not persons. It is also said that incidents should be reported, not mistakes by individuals. This meta-message seems to be both adopted and communicated by the managers and the QCs that we have interviewed. A challenge in this organization is consequently the size, since larger organizations tend to reduce coworkers’ perceptions of open communication with managers (Jablin, 1982).

Leaders also have an important role as facilitators of learning in their own staff groups through creating opportunities to discuss and solve serious and recurrent problems at staff meetings. These communication forums seem to have a key role in enhancing both learning and fostering an open communication climate. Managers at different levels and in different key positions also stress the need of feedback in order to motivate employees. However, managers have many different roles and responsibilities, and both managers and coworkers report that there is not enough time to give quick and rich feedback. The lack of feedback creates a credibility problem which can be noticed as a certain indifference among coworkers: “Does it really help if I report errors?”, one nurse asks. Thus, our conclusion is that the managers that have been interviewed seem to be aware of their importance as role models, facilitating detection of errors, prizing those who report errors and building trustful communication. However, the current turbulent situation with increased financial pressures and organizational problems means that coworkers do not have sufficient time and energy to work in accordance with such HRO-principles. An important conclusion is that the error management system primarily functions during the pre-crisis phase (signal detection and crisis perception) and the post-crisis phase (learning and resilience). During an acute crisis, there is no time or place for error reporting. Many coworkers at UH perceive the current state as an organizational crisis and the error reporting has also decreased during the last years.

As regards organizational learning, linked to the error management system, it tends mainly to take place on a local, micro-level. At the emergency, it seems to be quite often that small errors in daily micro-practices are observed and solved directly in informal communication practices among colleagues. As noted above, managers also inform and initiate discussions about recurrent and serious problems at various staff meetings. But, even at these formal meetings, learning is limited to the own staff group, and horizontal
learning between different units and departments within the hospital seems to be virtually non-existent. Our study also demonstrates that it is difficult to create learning at aggregated levels, e.g. for a whole division or at the overall hospital level.

Consequently, we have defined a great potential for increasing horizontal and vertical learning from error reporting. We believe this kind of learning is an essential part in working more strategically with error reporting and crisis management. UH is a large and complex organization composed of loosely coupled departments and units, and they tend to work and function rather independently. According to the NAT (Perrow, 1984), organizations should not be tightly coupled since that makes an organization slower in reaction and much more vulnerable in a crisis situation. But, a result from our study is that the QC who earlier was responsible for the error reporting system at the emergency division, played an important role in facilitating a more comprehensive learning process and a strategic approach. The QC clearly acted as a catalyst and facilitator of error management and increased the possibilities to exchange experience and knowledge between units within the division. Further, the QC had capabilities to observe error patterns among different departments, and could consequently detect evolving crises. The QC also had an important communication role in being a bridge both vertically and horizontally in the organization. Now, when the QC function has been withdrawn, as an effect of financial savings, the responsibility for coding the reports in the system, the interpretations, and feedback is given to the team leaders, which do not have an overall perspective and probably will not have the same possibilities to discover overall patterns. We see an increasing risk that practice will be reduced to tactical work and “putting out fires” that break out frequently. A further consequence is that the effectiveness ideal of New Public Management forces the UH away from the fundamental HRO-principles – a change that will increase the focus on success rather than failure, and efficiency instead of reliability (cf. Weick et al., 1999).

Another crucial part in working more proactively and strategically is to create a much closer link between error management and internal crisis management. It is obvious that our interviewees can see a direct and close connection between them, but this awareness is not reflected in the organizational structure where error management and crisis management seem to be two separate functions or systems. In recent years, there have been various attempts to implement lean health care where reflections and problem solving are important ingredients. The big problem of errors within medical healthcare organizations will certainly require new managerial ideals and practices (Stock et al., 2006), and lean health care can be of great help here. But again, we see a tendency of different functions and principles not being sufficiently integrated, and we would like to see a much closer link between error management and lean health care.

Implications
This study has implications for research, and has shown the complexity of organizations when it comes to crisis management and crisis communication. Too often these two fields are separated by researchers but are in fact closely related and mutual dependent. The French crisis researcher Christophe Roux-Dufort (2007) emphasizes that research in organizational crisis would benefit from closing off organizational theory. Further, Roux-Dufort claims that research should focus on organizational crises as exception management of rare situations. Mainstream research in crisis communication has mainly produced knowledge about how organizations can manage unexpected crisis situations, but has not paid enough attention to how organizations function or how they may be developed to better handle crises. From a social constructionist perspective, organizational crises should be understood as a long incubation process that starts long before the actual triggering incident. A similar
point is made by Astrid Kersten (2005) who understands crises as a result of normal activity in a dysfunctional system, and researchers ought therefore to investigate the dysfunctional system *per se* to prevent future crises. Hence, there is a profound need for more research on crisis communication from an internal perspective, i.e. internal crisis communication. Further, our study has shown that crisis communication is not only a matter for the communication department, but also for managers and coworkers. We have described how organizational members can be an important part of the crisis management system, by detecting errors and preventing crisis. That requires an organizational crisis culture and leadership, that constantly has crisis on the agenda and perceive errors in a positive way by focusing on the learning potential. Internal crisis communication is, as we see it, a fundamental part of the communicative organization, which recognizes the importance of communication for the existence of organizations. In a communicative organization, the management group, managers and coworkers understand that organizational success builds on mutual respect, commitment and open communication. However, the political aspects of organizational learning should not be ignored, since both the macro and micro aspects of power influence the learning potential.

This study has also implications for practitioners. Communication professionals that would like to develop their organization into a “Communicative Organization” have great potential by facilitating internal crisis communication and error management. Earlier research (e.g. Bowen, 2009) confirms that communication professionals who have substantial knowledge of, or have proven to have good skills in, crisis communication have optimal possibilities to increase their status and power in an organization. The communicative organization involves an understanding that all organizational members are potential ambassadors of the organization, and consequently resources of crisis management. In this paper, we have exclusively focused on internal crisis communication and truly believe that putting coworkers in the limelight when it comes to internal crisis communication is an important step towards becoming a communicative organization. The communicative organization involves actively listening to different stakeholders, and, most important, listening to the voices of coworkers (cf. Macnamara, 2016). By determinedly paying attention to and listening to coworkers, organizations have better opportunities to avoid a fully developed organizational crisis. Further, if coworkers experience that managers listen to and appreciate feedback and information, it becomes more likely that their engagement will strengthen (Heide and Simonsson, 2018). However, we must not be naïve and disregard power structures in the organization which do affect the possibilities of organizational learning. It is important that top management takes the power dimension seriously and discusses it, if they would like to improve organizational learning and opportunities to learn from errors and hopefully avoid a crisis. Even if the UH may be an extreme case, other organizations can learn from this case and be inspired to rethink how they perceive errors and by starting to see coworkers as an important resource in the crisis management system.

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**Further reading**


**Corresponding author**

Mats Heide can be contacted at: mats.heide@isk.lu.se
An exploratory analysis of corporate social responsibility reporting in US pharmaceutical companies

Lori Cook, Helen LaVan and Ivana Zilic
Department of Management and Entrepreneurship, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to compare “how we see ourselves” vs “how others see us” when communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities in US pharmaceutical companies.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected as follows: CSR reports from the companies themselves and Business Press reports from the Lexis-Nexis database. NVivo content analysis was used to compare CSR communication by companies and the Business Press. This analysis was comprised of almost 10 million words. Comparisons of Carroll’s framework, including the economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic categories between CSR reports and the Business Press, were done. Additional analysis was done to discern individual, organizational, and societal patterns of communications. Return on assets was computed for companies that have formal CSR reports and those that do not.

Findings – The analysis of documents containing almost 10 million words allowed the following conclusions: companies communicate more about their economic and philanthropic activities, and the Business Press communicates more about their legal and ethical activities. The companies and the Business Press communicated similarly about individual CSR. The organization communicated more about organizational topics, and the Business Press communicated less about societal topics.

Originality/value – This paper makes both substantive and methodological contributions. Its substantive contribution allows an understanding of what pharmaceutical companies need to do to fully communicate their CSR activities. Its methodological contribution is in suggesting that content analysis be used in understanding communication patterns. A levels of analysis approach allowed the discernment of individual-oriented, organizational, and societal-oriented communication patterns.

Keywords CSR, Organizational identity, Organizational communication, Corporate communication, Corporate social responsibility

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As the global business environment has expanded so has corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting. The growth and interest in corporate responsibility (CR) was demonstrated in the first KPMG Survey of Corporate Responsibility Reporting performed back in 1993, when only 12 percent of the largest 100 companies in 45 countries reported on CR. Fast forward over 20 years and 9 surveys later, the 2015 KPMG survey reported that 73 percent of largest 100 companies in 45 countries reported on CR. A similar growth pattern has been observed for the 250 largest companies from various business sectors in the Fortune Global 500 ranking. The 1999 KPMG survey results for this select group indicated that only 35 percent of the organizations reported on CR. In the 2015 KPMG survey, this number grew to 92 percent and peaked at 95 percent in 2011.

CR reporting is becoming a standard practice for organizations from all sizes, sectors, and regions. However, differences are still evident between both countries and business sectors. There is a speculation that the differences in CR reporting may be attributed to variety of factors. For example, one potential reason could be the increase in mandatory
government reporting requirements present in some countries. Another explanation could be internal and external stakeholders calling for more transparency to facilitate a more complete understanding of a specific company’s risk profile. Irrespective of the reason, there appears to be general agreement that CR is context dependent.

This study highlights practices in one country and one sector purposely to control for country and sector differences, such as regulations, taxation, and societal expectations. The rationale for the selection of the US pharmaceutical companies is in part driven by the sheer magnitude of the sector and the immense consequences on stakeholders. The sector represents 3.4 percent of the total US economy. In 2015, total spending on drugs in the USA increased 8.5 percent to $309.5 billion (Loo, 2015). It employs 854,000 workers and supports approximately 3.6 million additional jobs. It generates $123,000 per worker in wages and benefits and $67 billion in tax revenue. The percent of its sales devoted to R&D is 10.7 percent and is higher than any other industry. However, only three out of ten drugs that are approved for market are profitable. No other sector has such a tremendous life and death impact on stakeholders – specifically patients.

The public also has the expectation that the companies will engage in CSR more so than other sectors such as manufacturing or hospitality (Loo, 2015; S&P Global Market Intelligence, 2016).

The aim of our research is focused on the reporting content about CSR in Business Press structured by Carroll’s framework “how others see us.” We examine relationships with four different categories and perspective in the pharmaceutical industry with the wide usage of various newspapers. The “how we see ourselves” analysis is from the companies’ own CSR reporting. Together, the analysis of the 10 million words across the two type of data allows for a comparison of “how we see ourselves” vs “how others see us” in the sector’s CSR activities.

The research questions are as follows:

RQ1. What are the differences between how the companies and the Business Press communicates CSR of pharmaceutical companies?

RQ2. What are the differences in ROA between those companies that have formal CSR reporting and those that do not?

Literature review

For decades, the associated terminology, definitions, and communication of CSR have progressed to reflect current business perspectives. One of the barriers to advancing the understanding of the implications of CSR is that there are competing frameworks – the distinction between them may only be minor but detrimental to understanding of what organizations actually are doing (Carroll, 2015; Schwartz and Carroll, 2008). Carroll (2015) notes: “Other related competing and complementary concepts such as business ethics, corporate citizenship, stakeholder management, and sustainability have contended for the public’s acceptance.”

Du et al. (2010) proposed a conceptual framework of CSR communication, which includes message content and communication channels moderated by stakeholder and company characteristics and specific factors that influence the effectiveness of CSR communication. Dabic et al. (2016) analyzed the academic literature on industry-specific CSR practices. They analyzed 302 articles to map the CSR literature, identify which industries have been under greater scrutiny, and identify trends in the most researched industries. Their results suggest that the CSR studies are unevenly distributed and that the issues studied and the methods used vary widely across industries. This of course is not the same as analyzing the reports themselves.
Carroll and Shabana (2010) and others discussed the business case for CSR. Basically, this is the question of what do businesses get from CSR policies, activities, and practices. Carroll noted:

The business case for CSR refers to the arguments that provide rational justification for CSR from a corporate financial perspective. Arguments in favor of the business case contend that CSR oriented firms will be rewarded by the market in economic and financial terms. A narrow view of the business case justifies CSR when there can be a demonstrated direct and clear link to the firm’s financial performance. A broad view of the business case testify CSR when it produces direct and indirect links to financial performance. A fair number of studies have been conducted on the relationship between CSR and firm profitability. Overall there has been a demonstrated but highly variable relationship between CSR and corporate financial performance. (p. 89)

Kotchen and Moon (2012) contended that it is not a business case at all, but that organizations engage in CSR to offset their other irresponsible behaviors. Another perspective on this might be that it is not a business case at all, but creating shared value (Porter and Kramer, 2011).

There is a lack of empirical research regarding CSR and its impact on organizational outcomes. The studies that do exist are limited to developing countries (Mehralian et al., 2016; Odipo and Njeru, 2016) or to small countries, such as Scandinavia (Strand et al., 2015). Additionally, they tend to be attitudinal, either by survey or Delphi (Shengtian and Zhang, 2014) or literature reviews (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Dabic et al., 2016). Dabic et al. (2016) analyzed the academic literature on industry-specific CSR practices. They analyzed 302 articles to map the CSR literature, identify which industries have been under greater scrutiny, and identify trends in the most researched industries. Their results suggest that the CSR studies are unevenly distributed, and that the issues studied and the methods used vary. They do not describe in an objective manner, what companies are actually doing with CSR. Other studies, which are either multi-country or multi-sector do not take into account stakeholder differences (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Pollach et al., 2012). Aguinis and Glavas (2012) noted this, including a call for more analysis of CSR at the micro-level of analysis.

The intent of this study is to build upon the general knowledge gained in prior work and conduct an industry-focused study to assess the extent that top US pharmaceutical companies are communicating in their CSR reports vs what the Business Press communicates about the respective companies.

**How we see ourselves and how others see us**

*How we see ourselves in the pharma sector*

There have been a number of studies using content analysis to examine various topics related to organizational CSR reporting practices. Maignan and Ralston (2002) compared the content and type of communication about CSR for top companies located in France, the Netherlands, the UK, and the USA. The study examined the CSR principles, processes, and stakeholder issues discussed in web pages. The results indicated significant differences between the countries and methods used to convey and portray an image of social responsibility. Basil and Erlandson (2008) performed a longitudinal study to assess the representation of CSR activities on the top 1,000 Canadian companies’ websites. A sample of the websites showed that only 27 percent displayed some form of CSR activity in 2003, and this increased to 67 percent in 2006. They proposed that more successful companies based on company rank, profit, and total revenue had more CSR activity on their websites which was motivated by internal CSR behaviors.

Sones et al. (2009) performed a content analysis of five pharmaceutical companies’ mission and value statements web pages to assess the CSR message being communicated to internal and external stakeholders. They analyzed Lerbinger’s pyramid of CSR schema
to determine if the company’s website is primarily communicating with internal or external stakeholders. They found the mission statements were used as a communication tool for external stakeholders to emphasize supporting social good. Their results suggested that value statements were used for internal stakeholders with an emphasis on the company’s actions for producing goods and services to minimize societal costs. Overall, the results indicate a strong tendency to communicate with both external and internal stakeholders.

How leading corporations in the USA and China discuss the rationales, themes, and practices of CSR on their corporate websites was analyzed by doing a content analysis by Tang et al. (2014). Based on data collected in 2008, the results indicate that leading US companies demonstrate a higher level of comprehensiveness and standardization in their CSR communication, while Chinese companies in different industries take distinctive approaches to CSR. The authors collected additional data in 2012, which showed the Chinese companies have adopted standardized approaches in CSR communication, similar to their US counterparts. The authors suggest the convergence of reporting may be attributed to increased reporting requirements.

Holder-Webb et al. (2009) analyzes the CSR disclosure practices of a stratified sample of 50 publicly traded US firms, performing a content analysis on the complete identifiable public information portfolio provided by these firms during 2004. The main tools of disclosure are mass media releases such as corporate websites and press releases, followed by disclosure contained in mandatory filings. The paper identifies industry effects in terms of content, emphasis, and reporting format choices.

How others see us in the pharma sector
In 2003, Carroll and McCombs (2003) researched “agenda setting theory” of business news and its influence on corporate reputations. Not surprisingly, people are aware of the message, and they form their opinion of the image of the companies.

Buhr and Grafström (2007) followed up their earlier study in the British Financial Times and found partial linkage to Carroll’s classification in the second period, 1999-2003. The partial linkage connects two dimensions from Carroll’s framework – the ethical and the economic. Terms that were analyzed and subsequent word counts were (responsibility/responsible (888); ethical (186); need (168); rights (135); good (206); value (107), and the economic (company/companies/company’s (1955); business/businesses (1,263); corporate (981); executive/executives (304); management (232); investment (204); financial (192); industry (182); director (173); chief (161); managers (148); market (140); governance (123); economic (118); trade (108); and leaders (103).

Similarly, Carroll (2010) found a positive relationship between media and corporate reputation in Denmark. Dickson and Eckman (2008) also found that the content of media coverage is focused on public reporting and transparency. Also, they were looking for the importance of brand accountability and responsibility of corporations regarding working conditions and labor standards. They suggest that companies should be engaged in public reporting about ethics in foreign workplaces (Reebok, Adidas, and Nike): “We encourage firms not to shy away from public reporting about their social responsibility initiatives and the challenges they face in attaining the desired social performance.”

Although the literature is overwhelming in favor of using Carroll’s framework, other researchers examined the use of the media in reporting CSR. Tench et al. (2007) did a comparative research about CSR components, using a different framework regarding how the media interprets and understands CSR. Drawing on the inductive research method, a bottom-up approach to theory building was used, whereby practice-based primary research is reported on and the implications for new and existing theoretical constructs teased out. They concluded that there are five orientations in CSR: conformist, cynic, realist, optimist, and strategic idealist.
Zhang and Swanson (2006) examined the influence of news media on CSR, and also how news media reports CSR. Three keywords were searched in the full-text newspaper articles: corporate, social, and responsibility. In the second round of searching, they looked for the term corporate citizen. They found that the media contains the usage of the following terms: objective use, social achievement of corporations, a necessary business function, social expectation for corporations, and spin. The majority of the terms are positive, and the media is more accepting of the CSR concept than of PR.

According to Zyglidopoulos et al. (2012), the media attention is an important driver of CSR:

The strengths seem to be more adjustable to stakeholder pressures than the weaknesses [...] firms are often limited regarding their CSR-weaknesses by the business they are in, but not regarding their CSR-strengths. For example, an oil company can only reduce its CSR-weaknesses by reducing its environmental pollution up to a point. However, the same firm can increase its CSR-strengths in multiple ways that could be completely unrelated to its main line of business.

Hou and Reber (2011) used content analysis identifying five other dimensions of CSR in their CSR activities. The five dimensions are: environment, community relations, diversity, employee relations, and human rights. Their findings showed that the most of the companies are engaged in various types of CSR activities.

While a variety of methodologies have been used to research CSR in the media, these are primarily content analysis of press reports. Additionally, editorials, op-ed columns, guest columns, news analyses, letters to the editor, database analysis, and inductive reasoning have all been used to research CSR-related activities in the media. Numerous authors have done content analysis, identifying the media to analyze from different sources. These include Buhr and Grafström (2007), Dickson and Eckman (2008), Grafström and Windell (2011), Meijer and Kleinnijenhuis (2006), and Kiousis et al. (2006). Other authors specifically examined existing databases. Kiousis et al. (2007) used Factiva database and specifically PR releases. Lee and Carroll (2011) used the content analysis of editorials, op-ed columns, guest columns, news analyses, and letters to the editor. Inductive reasoning from reported activities was also a strategy to collect the data.

Buhr and Grafström (2007) did a content analysis on the meaning of CSR and its relevance in the British Financial Times. This research was conducted during two time periods, analyzing a total of 288 articles in the Financial Times. In the first period, 1988-1998, there were only 16 articles published about CSR. During the years 1999-2003, there were 252 articles published about CSR. In the first period, they used NVivo analyzing vocabulary. In the second time period, they used qualitative and quantitative textual analysis; not only the word CSR, but also its meaning. In the context of meaning of the CSR for the second period, they found three rhetorical strategies – the scope of CSR, problems when CSR is neglected, and CSR as a solution.

Dickson and Eckman (2008) used qualitative and content analysis for analyzing primary and secondary claims presented by the media and social performance of Fair Labor Association (FLA) firms.

Grafström and Windell (2011) examined how the CSR has been presented in the Business Press from 2000 to 2009. With the usage of content analysis, the authors found that the business media Financial Times and The Guardian contribute to the structure of the meaning of CSR in corporations.

Meijer and Kleinnijenhuis’s (2006) research focused on business news and corporate reputation. They did a content analysis to measure the corporate reputation and organizational news. They found that the political communication theories apply in the business communication context.

Kiousis et al. (2006) did a content analysis about media press and political candidates. The content analysis was focused not so much on CSR, but on tangential societal issues,
such as education, economy, health, care, crime, terrorism, environment, problems of the elderly, foreign affairs, children’s issues, qualifications, personality, and integrity. They also considered their effect (negative, neutral, or positive).

Kiousis et al. (2007) used Factiva database for Business Press articles. They found the various influences of public relations and media coverage on corporate reputation.

Lee and Carroll (2011) used a content analysis of editorials, op-ed columns, guest columns, news analyses, and letters to the editor from nine major newspapers in the USA. Focusing on Carroll’s dimensions, it can be seen that those dimensions changed over time:

The economic dimension in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the philanthropic in the late 1980s and early 1990s and then again in the mid-to-late 1990s, then legal responsibility in the late 1990s, followed by ethical responsibility in the early 2000s. In the 1980s, for instance, the most frequently discussed issues were those of economic responsibility. The proportion of economic responsibility issues decreased in the 1990s, but these issues were still discussed as much as other issues. In the meantime, issues of corporate legal responsibility and philanthropic responsibility were intensively discussed during the period of 1995-1999 but declined slightly until 2004. Most recently, there has been increased discussion of ethical issues; this has increased since 1990 and peaked during the period from 2000 to 2004. Overall, in earlier years, one particular dimension was discussed more than other dimensions. By 2004, however, the proportion of each dimension had become similar.

Tench et al. (2007) used the inductive research method, which is a bottom-up approach and looks at practices-based primary research which is reported on. Then implications for new and existing theoretical constructs are teased out.

**Limitations of Business Press and CSR-Related research**

Grafström and Windell’s (2011) research did not discuss the differences and how companies and the Business Press communicate CSR in a specific industry, and from the stakeholder perspective. Additionally, their research did not include the entire Business Press.

Carroll (2010) noted that there is a positive relationship between media and corporate reputation. But the question “is it the corporate reputation that attracts media attention or is it the media attention that forms corporate reputation?” is unclear in his research.

Buhr and Grafström (2007) did a research about the meaning of the term CSR and found that business media influence the term and meaning of CSR. Our research will incorporate two more dimensions – legal and philanthropic – to conform to Carroll’s framework. Additionally, dividing our content analysis into three categories, namely, individual, organizational, and societal, facilitates the understanding of the focus of the communication of CSR in the pharmaceutical industry.

Dickson and Eckman (2008) did a research on ethical management and how the media portrayed five public reporting events initiated by the FLA. They considered whether the coverage by the media of certain labor violations that have an ethical or transparency component encourages or discourages companies from undertaking a reporting initiative as part of their ethical management. This research relates to our manuscript because we are structuring our research with use of Carroll’s Framework, where one of the category is ethics. However, Dickson and Eckman (2008) only considered the ethics component of the framework.

According to Grafström and Windell (2011), the Business Press is not only a distributor but a producer and constructor of news. When the Business Press reports about CSR and corporate activities, it refers to corporate philanthropy, corporate regulations, human resource management, and local community. The second contribution about CSR arguments is as a business case where CSR can create business value, which connects with the economic category of Carroll’s framework. The paper is focused on the CSR content in business media. In this research, there are linkages with two categories – the economic and philanthropy categories from Carroll’s Framework.
As previously noted, there are limitations in the analysis of CSR. The limitations are in the nature of limiting the scope to developing or small countries, and are attitudinal, analysis of the existing literature, or do not describe actual company CSR-related activities or do not take into account sector, country, or stakeholder differences. Moreover, Aguinis and Glavas (2012) specifically called for a more micro-level of analysis.

The limitations of existing research with respect to the Business Press that our study seeks to address are as follows: No sector differences; limited types of press, rather than the entire press; the reciprocal nature of media and corporate reputation; and the separate dimensions rather than the four dimensions of Carroll’s framework.

Our research will address the gap in the literature in that the analysis of CSR has not been done in a comparative manner, comparing “how we see ourselves” and “how others see us,” comparing what companies report vs what the Business Press reports. The main pharmaceutical study that has been done by Sones et al. (2009) was a website analysis of mission and value statements, and did not do comparative analysis. Some studies looked at the one-way communication of the companies. Some studies had specific aims in mind, such as identifying societal benefits, using a variety of conceptual frameworks, or identifying the CSR of political candidates. There are other studies that are single country or comparative among two or more countries, but in a variety of sectors, where confounding factors may be introduced.

Methodology
The use of content analysis of documents is highly regarded and, in fact, touted as an approach to understanding corporate practices – not only CSR practices (Bowen, 2009). A review of the literature found that these publications tend to be limited in the sample size, and sectors other than pharmaceutical, multinational, but not USA. Du and Vieira (2012) conducted a content analysis to identify the characteristics of CSR strategies and CSR communication tactics of oil companies by analyzing the website content. Similarly, Mutti et al. (2012) analyzed stakeholder perspectives in the extractive industry.

NVivo software has often been used to analyze interviews of stakeholders, rather than using it as tool for analysis of company documents. Rahbek Pedersen and Neergaard (2009) performed a content analysis for the interviews of managers in one multinational organization regarding the managers’ perceptions of CSR. Zulkifli and Amran (2006) conducted an analysis of interviews with accounting professionals in Malaysia. Using NVivo content analysis, Mikkilä et al. (2005) took an acceptability approach to content analysis of interviews relating to the acceptability of pulp mills. Spena et al. (2014) reported exploring trends in multinational corporations’ CSR communication strategy by conducting a longitudinal analysis of CSR reports in the automotive sector in Europe. Lunenberg et al.’s (2016) approach was to use content analysis in their study of CSR to discern fit between the CSR and elements of the total CSR including tone and framing of the CSR activities. Their study did not focus on one type of organization, but looked at CSR in general within a timeframe of two months. A similar methodological approach is applied in this study for the US pharmaceutical sector.

Since CSR can be expected to vary by country, culture, and sector, most of the existing publications do not answer the question of how companies communicate their CSR. The approaches have either been content analysis of websites or interviews of a limited number of managers. Additionally, they tend to be country-specific, such as the studies in Argentina or Malaysia.

We are seeking to empirically test Carroll’s pyramid of CSR in the US pharmaceutical sector, in terms of “how we see ourselves” vs “how others see us.” We use NVivo coding to perform content analysis based on Carroll’s categories of economics, legal, ethical, and philanthropic in 25 of the largest US pharmaceutical companies. The companies selected were in the following categories: pharmaceutical preparations; biological products, except diagnostic substances; and drugs, drug proprieties, and druggists’ sundries with
over $1 billion in sales. Some companies were excluded in that they were primarily cosmetic
and beauty products companies. The “how we see ourselves” documents were retrieved first
from the GRI database. When not available, company CSR-related reporting documents were
retrieved from their respective websites. Sample titles of the reports retrieved include global
citizenship, CR, environmental sustainability report and citizenship and sustainability report.
For some companies, public documents were not available. The absence of these documents
was expected in view of KPMG reporting that one-third of top companies with SIC codes of
2834, 2836, and 5122 do not have separate, easily accessible CSR reports.

There was a total of 509,000 words in the word count of the CSR reports and a total of
9,200,000 words in the Business Press documents. Given the absolute differences in the
number of terms, percentages from each type of document were used to develop the
comparisons. Multiple coders were used to classify the words. An expert in CSR and health
care reviewed the methodology and concluded that based on his expertise and existing
literature, the approach was appropriate for discerning the differences in communications
between CSR and Business Press in the pharmaceutical sector. Using NVivo, the minimum
size of the letters in the words was three letters, and the top 1,000 words were extracted from
each of the two types of data. Some words were eliminated from the 1,000 top words list for
the following two reasons. First, words were forms of other words, such as plurals, and
multiple forms of the same word and singulars. Second, words were not relevant to the
classification of CSR activities, for example, “ability,” “numbers,” “dates,” “countries.”
Only 17 of the pharmaceutical companies had documents in which it could be expected that
CSR activities were reported. It should be noted that not only were the titles of CSR
reports varied, as previously discussed, but these documents varied considerably in size,
ranging from 1,400 to 127,000 words. It should be noted that these words are taken out of the
context. An examination of the context was made to discern that the meaning was
disclosed accurately. For example, names that did not specifically relate to the company
(i.e. Abbott – the name of a person) were eliminated from inclusion. Or the term “chief,”
which referred to the chief executive officer of chief products, was eliminated.

To identify “how others see us,” we retrieved articles in the Business Press from the
Lexis-Nexis database; newspapers were searched from January 2015 to December 2015
using the company name. The Business Press files ranged from 4,800 to over 2,300,000
words. It should be noted that the Business Press report is not exclusively about the
company and other companies are sometimes compared to the focal company in the same
document. In the final analyses, the top 30 words were classified. The researchers made a
determination that classifying more words did not especially add to the understanding of
what the companies were reporting in their CSR documents or what the Business Press was
reporting on the company activities.

There were two word classification systems. The first classification scheme was based on
Carroll; economic responsibilities be profitable – the foundation upon which all other rest; legal
responsibilities – obey the law, the law is society’s codification of right and wrong – play by
the rules; ethical responsibilities – be ethical – obligations to do what is right, just, and fair,
avoid harm; and philanthropic responsibilities – be a good corporate citizen, contribute
resources to the community, can improve quality of life. The second classification was based
on a levels of analysis approach, classifying the most frequent words as individual-oriented,
organizational-oriented, or societal-oriented words. In this classification, the words were
mutually exclusive – each word was categorized in only one level.

Further analysis was performed to investigate the communication of CSR activities
within the pharmaceutical industry and the extent to which the content is related
to financial reporting, and to other variables such as profitability between what
appeared in the CSR documents and what appeared in the Business Press for the
pharmaceutical companies.
Results

Table I displays the words from the CSR reports and the Business Press classified into Carroll’s framework. The reader can discern the shared terms in italics in this table. This analysis considers the terms that are shared from the two sources – the CSR documents and the Business Press reports. There is a higher frequency of terms and more variability of terms associated with the economic classification of the framework. For example, there are 11 shared words in the economic category. The other three categories only share four terms in common. As displayed in Figure 1, the frequencies have greater variability for the legal and ethical categories. Specifically, the percentage differences between the legal terms and the ethical terms are greater than the percentage differences for economic and philanthropic, meaning that there is less consistency in shared terminology for legal and ethical.

Another observation is that the terms used to express economic and philanthropic activities have less variability. This could be interpreted as the companies and the Business Press are more aligned in the reporting of economic and philanthropic activities. It was expected that CSR activities specific to the pharmaceutical sector, such as pricing, subsidization, and testing for FDA approvals on populations in third-world countries, would appear in the CSR communications and, to some extent, it did, if not explicitly. The following were in the CSR reports: care, patients, medical, world, global, and access. These are unique to the pharmaceutical sector in contrast to other sectors such as manufacturing or hospitality.

It should be noted that the frequencies do not total 100 percent due to the fact that the terms are not mutually exclusive and can appear in more than one category. This is as expected, as Carroll often expresses.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Legal</th>
<th>Ethical</th>
<th>Philanthropic</th>
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<td>Health</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>People</td>
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<td>Global</td>
<td>Drug</td>
<td>Environmental</td>
<td>Safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Company</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>People</td>
<td>Patients</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Market</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business</td>
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<td>People</td>
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<td>Products</td>
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<td>Fund</td>
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Note: Italicized words appear in both CSR reports and Business Press and may appear in one or more classifications.
Surprisingly, the following terms appear in the CSR reports but did not appear in the Business Press top 30 words: environmental, emissions, sustainability, compliance, or waste.

In a second analysis, the top terms were classified in terms of whether they were individual, organizational, or societal in nature, as shown in Table II. As displayed in Figure 2, a comparison was made based on the percent each was of the most frequent words. For example, the unique individual-oriented words in the CSR reports were 23 percent. This was coincidentally the same percentage in the Business Press – 23 percent of the most frequent words were individually oriented words. In total, 43 percent of the CSR unique words were organizational-oriented words. Unique words that were organizationally oriented in the Business Press report were 63 percent. Societal-oriented words in the CSR reports were 33 percent of the top words; this percentage is 13 percent for the Business Press. One conclusion that can be drawn is that the Business Press is much more concerned about the company and its profitability than it is concerned about communicating about the pharmaceutical sector’s societal impact. Another conclusion that can be drawn is that both the CSR reports and the Business Press are the most focused on organizational-related concepts.

In the third analysis, in response to the second research question, we considered whether there was a relationship between a pharmaceutical company having a formal CSR report and its associated return on assets in 2015. This data were retrieved from published data sources. Multivariate analysis did not lead to statistically significant differences, meaning that companies with CSR reports do not have a higher return on assets than companies that do not have CSR reports.

Conclusions
The first research question was to examine the differences between how the companies and the Business Press communicate CSR. The situation is that currently a considerable portion of the pharmaceutical organizations in the USA do not report CSR at all, and that the ones that do focus more on the economic factors. One implication of the differences in the CSR and Business Press is that if an organization wants control over legal and ethical content, it should do more with respect to communicating it in the CSR reports. It is imperative that they take the initiative to communicate more of the legal and ethical as it pertains to their CSR activities. If companies want societal support in terms of a more favorable business climate,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of analysis</th>
<th>CSR reports</th>
<th>Business Press</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Health, Employees, Care, Access, People, Patients, Help</td>
<td>Health, People, Patients, Cancer, Treatment, Care, Disease</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Italicized words appear in both CSR reports and Business Press

Table II. Descending order list of top words in the CSR reports and Business Press

Figure 2. Comparisons by levels of analysis
such as tax incentives or quick to market approvals from the FDA, more transparency and more information beyond the economic in the CSR reports would help facilitate this. Additionally, the variability in word count among the companies that do report makes it difficult for external or, for that matter, internal stakeholders to get a message that would allow for comparisons and support.

An important issue in CSR is the business case for it. Hence, the second research question was to examine the differences in ROA in those companies that have formal CSR reporting and in those that do not. Our results do not support a financial business case, in that the return on assets are not related to the CSR reporting.

Contributions
A contribution is that the study is a one-sector, one-country study. This was done by design in that the result of this is that factors that might interfere with conclusions are minimized. All companies are operating in the same legal and economic environment. This makes this a level playing field for the companies. The data are what the company is communicating to the market place vs respondents’ opinions. They are also what the “objective” Business Press is communicating.

Another contribution is the use of NVivo which allowed for a comprehensive content analysis of millions of words, beyond what many researchers have analyzed in the past. The use of NVivo also allows discernment of patterns in the content of the documents not readily observable through other methods. It points out that companies in the sector focus on economic and philanthropic terms in communicating their CSR, instead of communicating what most would consider more CSR-related activities, such as philanthropic and ethical activities. If a company wants to relay their CSR-related message, they have to take responsibility to assure that the message is being communicated to the market place. Otherwise, the Business Press communicates a different message. This methodology is replicable to other sectors and to content analysis of other methods of communication.

As previously noted, it was expected that CSR activities specific to the pharmaceutical sector, such as pricing, subsidization, and testing for FDA approvals on populations in third-world countries, would appear in the CSR communications. And, to some extent, it did, if not explicitly. The following were in the CSR reports: care, patients, medical, world, global, and access. These are unique to the pharmaceutical sector in contrast to other sectors, such as manufacturing or hospitality.

Given the amount of expenditures of the pharmaceutical companies on CSR, it does not seem that their message is getting appropriate notice in the Business Press. There are many disparities between what the pharmaceutical companies are communicating and what the Business Press is reporting. The Business Press is reporting more on economic issues, and the pharmaceutical companies are reporting more on the ethical issues. It is also noted that the focus of the Business Press was more on the organization, in contrast to the CSR reports being more societal focused. This would suggest that companies expand their public relations and press notices to get the Business Press to communicate about the societal impact of their CSR activities.

Limitations
There are a few limitations that should be noted. First, conducting an analysis in the pharmaceutical sector is both a positive and a negative. It is a positive in that the companies are operating in similar contexts. However, it is also a negative in that a proportion of the companies did not have formal CSR reports. It was necessary to intensively search for some CSR reports. This resulted in some documents being different from other CSR documents. Additionally, when there were formal reports, these reports were not always standardized. This does not mean that the companies are not engaging in CSR activities. It means that
they are not communicating their activities via CSR reports. Second, it was the researchers’
decision to decide where an appropriate cut-off point would be in the analysis of the
frequencies. Relatedly, these words were taken out of context, although the context was
separately reviewed for many of the words.

References


Further reading


Corresponding author

Lori Cook can be contacted at: lcook@depaul.edu

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Reading beyond the lines: themes and cultural values in corporate leaders’ communication

Cindy Sing-Bik Ngai
Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong, and
Rita Gill Singh
Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Abstract
Purpose – The unprecedented economic development and increase in the number of global corporations in the Greater China region, comprising the Chinese mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong, have led to more emphasis on corporate leader-stakeholder communication. Bilingual web-based messages posted on corporate websites, which aim to strategically cultivate positive relationships between leaders and stakeholders, have emerged as a primary mode of communication for Chinese corporations. However, a research study investigating the prominent themes and underlying cultural values depicted in leaders’ messages intended for different groups of stakeholders is lacking. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the themes and cultural values expressed through corporate leaders’ web-based messages in a non-western context.

Design/methodology/approach – Using an inductive approach, open coding and a categorization system, this study analyzed the web-based messages of leading corporations with WordSmith 6.0.

Findings – Six prominent themes in leaders’ communication were identified. These themes included, in order of importance: company development, operating philosophy, company profile, business environment, performance, and products and services. It was found that leaders strategically selected certain themes such as focusing on progress and the business environment but omitted others depending on how they wanted to strategically influence their stakeholders’ attitudes. Differences between the cultural values depicted in Chinese and the corresponding English messages could be attributed to leaders’ cultural adaptation of the messages intended for non-domestic stakeholders.

Originality/value – Since this study provides insights into the major themes preferred by leaders of corporations operating in Greater China, it will enable existing stakeholders to understand the main business focus of leaders and offer leaders more information about commonly accepted themes. These possibilities for enhanced knowledge on the part of stakeholders and business leaders, in turn, may potentially increase academic appreciation of the complexities involved in corporate communication. It also informs stakeholders about the variations in the values reflected in the English and Chinese messages of leaders, and, therefore, has a potential to offer value to academics and practitioners.

Keywords Culture, Leadership, Public relations, Communication strategy, Corporate communication, Corporate media

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction
Corporate leader-stakeholder communication has assumed more importance, given the fact that stakeholders’ support and trust are vital for organizational success (Kitchen and Schultz, 2001). As Conrad and Poole (2005, p. 410) argue, organizational communication influences opinions and attitudes “in ways that create support for organizational practices or undermine opposition to them.” Words exert an influence particularly when communicated strategically by corporate leaders to their stakeholders (Conaway and Wardrope, 2010). Strategic communication, defined as the purposeful employment of communication to achieve its mission (Aggerholm and Asmuss, 2016), can change or enhance an organization’s image...
The role of CEOs or business leaders is to articulate messages that communicate the organization’s strategic positioning, transmit values, give knowledge, and lead stakeholders (Amernic and Craig, 2007). The use of strategically designed messages by leaders is important due to increasing social, economic and political changes where there is an “organizational need of legitimacy to operate” in society (Falkheimer, 2014, p. 126). In particular, increased transparency, mobility and globalization impact organizations’ financial performance, coupled with the fact that relationships with various stakeholders have become more complex, uncertain and fragile (Falkheimer, 2014). Freeman (1984) argues that organizations need to consider all their stakeholders since stakeholders can exert a positive or negative impact on organizations. Heath (1997, p. 290) echoes that organizations should cultivate “mutually beneficial relationships” with all stakeholders.

In the internet era, corporate leaders are expected to be more communicative and able to employ web-based communication to connect with or report to their stakeholders in an effective manner. Standards have been set for corporate leaders such as CEOs, chairmen, presidents, and managing directors to implement the corporate communication strategy and impart the corporate culture and vision to stakeholders (Hamm, 2006; Kitchen and Schultz, 2001). According to Zerfass and Sherzada (2015, p. 292), “CEOs communicate with important stakeholders and they decide on the basic understanding and priorities of communication as well as on key structures and resources.” Ray (1999) defines a stakeholder as the public or a person that is affected by the organization’s policy while Freeman (1984, p. 46) defines stakeholders as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives.” Stakeholders from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Amernic and Craig, 2006) comprise capital market stakeholders (shareholders/banks), product market stakeholders (customers and suppliers), and organizational stakeholders (employees and managers) (Hitt et al., 2005).

Messages posted by leaders are perceived as part of a strategic communication strategy to influence stakeholders’ perception of corporations (Kitchen and Schultz, 2001; Zorn, 2001). Forman and Argenti (2005) noted that there was a linkage in the US and Latin American corporations in their corporate communication function and corporate strategy. Corporate leaders strategically choose certain important topics or themes but avoid some others to engage and influence their stakeholders’ attitudes and behavior (Conaway and Wardrope, 2010). For instance, positive news is amplified while negative news is given less emphasis to reduce stakeholders’ anxiety about the corporation’s prospects.

In fact, to date, little research has been done to identify the themes in corporate web-based messages in the Greater China region. Conaway and Wardrope (2010) analyzed the bilingual annual report letters written by CEOs of multinational corporations in the USA (i.e. English) and Latin America (i.e. Spanish) on websites to identify the themes and cultural values in these documents. They found some common themes expressed such as corporate governance, leadership, and customer relations. They also noted that cultural values were depicted in the Latin American letters much more than the North American letters such as appreciation for corporations’ employees as well as exhibiting warmth. Similarly, Singh et al. (2005) analyzed the cultural content of company websites focusing on marketing in China, India, Japan and the USA using content analysis in which they found that the local websites of these countries depicted their own cultural values. This supports the argument that the web is infused with cultural values and that leaders should take this into account when communicating with stakeholders from diverse linguistic backgrounds and regions.

The unparalleled economic development and increasing number of global corporations in the Greater China region, including the Chinese mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Weidenbaum, 1993), have made leader-stakeholder communication more prevalent. China is the world’s second largest trading economy, and Ngai and Singh’s (2015) study found that web-based messages were more commonly used by leaders in Greater
China corporations in 2013 as opposed to 2010. In 2016, 103 Chinese corporations were listed on the Fortune Global 500 list, and 41 out of 103 (40 percent) corporations in China used such messages for communicating with their stakeholders (Fortune, 2016). Nevertheless, to date, little research has been done to identify the themes in corporate web-based messages in the Greater China region.

Our study, therefore, mainly focuses on the identification of prominent themes, and inference of the cultural values depicted in messages by analyzing the web-based messages from leaders of listed corporations in Greater China. We based our study on two factors extrapolated from the literature: the rising power of Greater China corporations in the global business arena, and the lack of corporate communication research on the salient themes reflected in the web-based messages of listed corporations in Greater China. Since leaders’ messages are closely tied to their communication practices, which are based on their cultural values, we also aimed to infer the cultural values, for instance, the ones explained by Singh et al. (2005) as reflected in these messages so that leaders could strategically adapt their messages to stakeholders from diverse regions. Specifically, we aimed to comparatively analyze the differences between the Chinese and corresponding English versions of messages posted by leaders in terms of the cultural values they depicted. Our study focused on leader communication rather than the stakeholder theory since our emphasis was on the messages used by leaders.

This paper is structured as follows. First, the literature on leader web-based messages, theme categorization and cultural content on websites is briefly reviewed. Then we argue that the only available theme categorization system of Kohut and Segars (1992) has limitations with respect to being universally applicable to corporate communication. A subsequent justification of our need to identify the salient themes in leaders’ messages to stakeholders is offered, followed by our research questions and research design. The latter involved an inductive approach and the use of open coding. After outlining our findings, we provide the implications together with a consideration of the limitations of our study and suggestions for future studies.

2. Literature review

In this section, the current research on leader web-based messages, theme categorization and cultural content on corporate websites is reviewed to establish the need for the identification of prominent themes in leaders’ communication.

2.1 Research on leader web-based message studies

Horton (1995, p. 180) defines corporate messages as “instruments of or complements to actions,” which aim to meet business objectives. Corporate messages allow leaders to develop relations with stakeholders and communicate information about the corporation’s vision, values, business strategy and objectives.

Most research on corporate communication has analyzed the readability of corporate documents, for example, Rutherford’s (2005) study in the UK and Courtis and Hassan’s (2002) study on the readability of bilingual annual reports where a comparison of Chinese and English versions of 65 corporate annual reports was made with English and Malay versions of 53 annual reports in an attempt to examine whether bilingual reports contrasted in relation to their ease of reading. Other studies have focused on the linguistic stylistics in CEO messages, highlighting the need for such messages to be concise (e.g. Briggs, 2007; Garzone, 2004; Hyland, 1998).

With regard to the identification of themes, Kohut and Segars’ (1992) thematic categorization system investigated the themes in presidents’/CEOs’ letters in annual reports to stockholders in the top 25 and bottom 25 US corporations on the Fortune 500 List using content analysis. They found six prevalent common topics or themes in these messages and addresses, which included, in order of importance: environmental factors; growth; operating philosophy; product/market mix; unfavorable financial reference; and favorable...
financial reference. Using content analysis, they found that certain repetitive words/phrases or keywords came under each theme. For instance, the words “economy,” “recession,” “inflation” and “legislation” were keywords subsumed under the theme of environmental factors. While phrases like “expanding market share” and “improving sales trends” came under the theme of Growth, phrases such as “building a stronger organization” were under the theme operating philosophy (with a focus on corporate policies and operations), and “short-term losses,” “reduction in asset size” were under the theme of unfavorable financial reference. Phrases like “increased profits” and “gains” were placed under the theme of favorable financial reference.

However, it should be noted that Kohut and Segars’ study was based on CEO letters/addresses placed together with annual reports with more emphasis given to financial data, while our study focuses on web-based messages posted on websites in Greater China corporations. When employed by Ngai and Singh (2014) to examine the themes and intra-regional variations in the CEO messages of leading corporations in Greater China, the thematic categorization system of Kohut and Segars (1992) was found to be limited. The keywords used by Segars and Kohut (2001) could not fully reflect the themes found in the bilingual CEO messages examined in the previous study. Specific keywords such as “economy,” “recession” and “inflation” could not be identified in the bilingual texts. Ngai and Singh’s study has therefore incorporated keywords such as “global” and “worldwide” in the identification of themes. The suggested themes of Kohut and Segars (1992) were also not applicable to statements concerning the achievements of the corporations or the recognition of the support of stakeholders.

Likewise, Conaway and Wardrope (2010) examined the bilingual annual report letters written by CEOs of multinational corporations in the USA (i.e. English) and Latin America (i.e. Spanish) on their websites to identify their common topics or themes and cultural values. They found the following common themes ranked in order of importance: financial reporting, infrastructure and expansion, external environment, customer relations, corporate governance, leadership, social responsibility, and vision, mission and outlook. Keywords commonly found in letters were subsumed under the themes. For instance, phrases like “excellent customer service,” “customer commitment,” “loyalty,” “friendliness” and “commitment” came under the theme of customer relations. Phrases such as “good corporate citizenship,” “citizen of the world” and “development of our communities” were under the category of corporate social responsibility. The prioritization of the themes was based on the business environment and economic conditions in that period of time. In addition to identifying eight prevalent themes, they noted that those from Latin American corporations communicated more information than their US counterparts due to their cultural context. Certain cultural values were depicted in the Latin American letters such as the expression of gratitude to corporations’ employees and a depiction of warmth and collectivism.

The scope of previous research into cultural values as exemplified in corporate communication has been found to be lacking in pertinence. The thematic categorization that focused on annual letters about company finances cannot be applied in a pure sense to the messages communicated by corporate leaders in Greater China. The current study examines common keywords and themes in generic leader-stakeholder communication in the region with the aim of cataloging new parameters for the genre.

2.2 Research on cultural content of company websites

Understanding cultural differences as demonstrated by corporations, and the effect of culture on corporations via information technology, has been found to be important in the literature (Myers and Tan, 2002). Luna et al. (2002) surmised that culturally congruent web content reduced the cognitive burden on readers’ to digest information and brought about a better attitude toward the website.
Specifically, the use of content analysis has improved insights into cultural values on the web. Singh and Matsuo's (2004) cultural framework to analyze the depiction of cultural values on the web has been empirically validated, and incorporates different cultural perspectives such as Hofstede's (1980) dimensions and Hall's (1976) high- and low-context cultures. Singh et al. (2005) content analyzed the cultural content of company websites focusing on marketing in China, India, Japan and the USA where they found that the local websites of these countries reflected their own cultural values. They used the cultural framework of Singh and Matsuo's (2004), which includes the dimensions of individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance and masculinity as proposed by Hofstede (1980), and high- and low-context cultures as suggested by Hall (1976). Collectivism vs individualism is defined as the extent to which a society follows group norms and places emphasis on family ties as opposed to focusing on individual goals, independence and achievement, respectively (Hofstede, 1980). Power distance refers to how a society views inequality and high power distance societies place emphasis on social status, power and authority as well as show respect to leaders, whereas low power distance societies focus on equal rights (Hofstede, 1980). Masculine societies emphasize success, performance and ambition, whereas feminine societies focus on beauty and ambiguous gender roles (Hofstede, 1980). Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which a society can tolerate risks (Hofstede, 1980). A society that is high on uncertainty avoidance is more likely to value security, and prefers clear directions and rules. Hall (1976) distinguished high- and low-context communication. “A high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” with the Chinese more likely to be high-context communicators (Hall, 1976, p. 91). Low-context cultures focus on directness and clarity in communication (Hall, 1976).

Using content analysis, Singh et al. (2005) found that the Chinese websites focusing on marketing depicted the importance of the family theme or collectivism since the notion of family gives the individual his/her identity in China. High power distance was exhibited through the vision statement given by the CEO with the use of phrases such as “pride of ownership appeal” (Singh et al. 2005, p. 138) while tradition was also emphasized. High-context communication was reflected through the use of indirect and vague terms and conditions of use in online contracts, which aligns with the Chinese tradition of personal relationships in conducting business. On the other hand, Singh et al. (2005) noted that the US websites exhibited individualistic values and low-context communication with a prominent theme of independence and employment of superlatives. The US websites did not place emphasis on tradition but rather were more direct, informative and business-oriented. Similarly, Singh and Matsuo (2004) highlighted that websites reflect cultural values in their comparison of Japanese and US websites on the Forbes 500 list from automotive, electronic and retail companies, where they noted that Japanese websites exhibited higher power distance, collectivism and uncertainty avoidance when compared with the US websites.

Singh et al. (2003) also ascertained that cultural adaptation takes place on the web. They identified a difference between US-based international corporations’ domestic websites, and their Chinese websites with the Chinese websites being more collectivistic as evidenced from their stress on national identity and use of cultural symbols. Chinese websites also display higher power distance as reflected in the use of titles and presentation of company hierarchy information, as well as being high-context in communication as reflected in the use of politeness and a soft-sell approach. This supports the notion that cultural adaptation is often practiced by corporations in terms of customizing their website to the local culture of their stakeholders from a different country.

Our aim was to identify the predominant themes that leaders in Greater China corporations would employ to strategically influence their stakeholders’ attitudes and behavior and infer the different cultural values as reflected in the English and Chinese
versions of messages intended for non-domestic and domestic stakeholders, respectively, as well as infer whether cultural adaptation of messages was observed in the English version of messages.

3. Research objectives and questions
We examined the content of bilingual web-based leader messages posted on the websites of listed corporations in Taiwan, Shanghai, and Hong Kong to identify the predominant themes used by leaders. Themes refer to topic headings or common topics (e.g. business environment, operating philosophy, etc.) present in messages. Since communication stems from cultural contexts (Edwards and Rees, 2011) and is underpinned by power and control issues (Tayeb, 1998), we were also interested in inferring the different cultural values depicted in the messages of leaders in communicating with stakeholders from diverse regions by analyzing the repeated or frequently used phrases/words or keywords that they used. Our research questions were as follows:

RQ1. What are the most frequently used Chinese and English keywords in leaders’ messages and how do they vary in different languages?

RQ2. What are the correlated topic headings or themes emerging from the Chinese and English keywords identified?

RQ3. How do the keywords and themes reflect the cultural values of leaders in Greater China when communicating with stakeholders from diverse countries?

4. Research design, sample and method
We used an inductive approach, open coding and a categorization system to analyze the leader web-based messages.

First, we created a corpus of leaders’ bilingual web-based messages from corporate websites of 250 corporations listed in the three prominent stock market indexes in Greater China in 2013: the Hong Kong Hang Seng Index, the Shanghai Composite Index and the Taiwan Weighted Index, comprising all 35 blue-chip and all 115 red-chip corporations from the Hong Kong Hang Seng Index, and all 50 listed corporations from both the Shanghai Composite Index and the Taiwan Weighted Index. Leaders’ web-based messages that focused on communication between corporate leaders and their stakeholders were chosen. To avoid a financial bias in the identification of salient themes owing to the inclusion of texts focusing on financial performance, only leaders’ web-based communication titled “CEO Message,” “Letter from CEO,” “Chairman’s Message,” “Chairman’s Address,” “Letter from Chairman,” “Chairman’s Statement,” “President Address,” and “General Manager’s Speech,” which shared a communicative purpose of conveying the beliefs, business strategies and practices of the corporation to its internal and external stakeholders was selected (Collins and Porras, 1996, p. 77; Fox and Fox, 2004, pp. 32-43; Koller, 2009, pp. 51-52). In total, we identified 32 corporate messages from leaders, out of which we created a corpus of 20,415 words in Chinese and 11,959 words in English. These messages were written in both Chinese and English (see Table AI).

After developing the keyword and theme list, and to increase the reliability of our findings, the keyword search function of WordSmith 6.0 was used to ascertain key lexical items or keywords that had a high frequency of usage in leaders’ web-based communication. When there was a discrepancy between the authors’ coding and WordSmith 6.0, we followed the WordSmith analysis since it was more accurate in identifying all examples of keywords used. Filtering out the functional terms in Chinese and English such as “an,” “and,” “at,” “be,” “can,” “for,” “from,” “in,” “not,” “on,” “of,” “to,” “with,” we identified the top 30 keywords in both Chinese and English in leaders’ web-based communication in Greater China.
In the application of WordSmith Tools 6.0 to word frequency analysis, we encountered two challenges that we tackled. First, we had to filter out Chinese and English functional words before examining the corpus with the frequency function. Second, we needed to segment the lexicons in the Chinese corpus for frequency count.

To examine the relationship between the top ranked keywords and related themes, we associated the keywords with the adapted themes from Ngai and Singh’s (2014) study on the analysis of CEO messages of major corporations in Greater China. A theme refers to an identified topic heading or a common topic (e.g. operating philosophy, company profile). The adapted themes including company development, operating philosophy, business environment, product and service, corporate performance, and company profile were developed from the thematic categories identified by Kohut and Segars (1992) in their examination of CEO letters. By using the Concordance function of WordSmith Tools 6.0, the concordance of keywords with their immediate context was uncovered. A trained coder was employed to examine the congruence of the keywords with the adapted themes, and unfold the ranking of the adapted themes. Specifically, the ranking of the themes was determined by the frequency of keywords, clustering of keywords and the salience of dominant keywords that indicated the importance of the themes adapted in leaders’ messages.

We also anticipated that the aim of leader messages might be more strategic than being purely informative to influence stakeholders to trust the corporation, and that the web may be infused with cultural values as suggested by Singh et al. (2003). We therefore investigated the messages that revealed aspects of the Chinese culture by inferring the values of Greater China corporations. We also undertook a comparison of the Chinese and corresponding English versions of messages to identify if any differences were seen such as the depiction of different cultural values or cultural adaptation. Specifically, the inter-lingual variation of leaders’ bilingual messages, which reflects the difference in communication practices adopted by Chinese leaders, was conducted, although this was exploratory in nature.

5. Findings

5.1 RQ1 – the most frequently used Chinese and English keywords in leaders’ messages
The bilingual leader messages and addresses collected from the 32 corporations were carefully examined using WordSmith Tools 6.0 and we generated a list of the top 30 keywords in English and Chinese, as shown in Table I, based on the frequency of use.

5.2 Variation of keywords in different language modes
Equivalent English and Chinese keywords were consistent in the top four although the order of two of these keywords varied, but they diverged below this level. “Employees,” for example, ranked 13th in English but 7th in Chinese; “Global” came 12th in English but 18th in Chinese. Some Chinese keywords such as “社會” (society) were not found in the English list.

In the English list, instrumental, business-oriented and outcome-related keywords were evident, such as “development,” “business,” “value,” “resource,” “financial,” “product,” and “strategy.” This suggests that the shareholder perspective is being represented, with importance placed on results or financial-based metrics of considerable interest to shareholders (Paauwe, 2004). In contrast, the Chinese keywords seem to indicate a greater concern for stakeholders and the Chinese community with words such as “社會” (society), “員工” (employee), and “責任” (responsible) being used.

5.3 RQ2 – correlated topic headings/themes emerging from the Chinese and English keywords identified
In an attempt to examine the relationship between the top ranked keywords and related themes, we linked the keywords with the adapted themes from Ngai and Singh’s (2014)
study for the examination of CEO messages of corporations in Greater China. Company development corresponded to Kohut and Segars’ (1992) theme of Growth but placed more emphasis on progress. Operating philosophy was the same theme as Kohut and Segars’ (1992). Special emphasis was placed on the relationship with stakeholders as reflected in the keywords rather than the strengthening of corporate image, as suggested by Kohut and Segars (1992). Business environment was synonymous with Kohut and Segars’ (1992) environmental factors. However, our study indicated the predominance of keywords such as “market” and “global,” emphasizing the global orientation of Greater China corporations. The themes of product and service and corporate performance were similar to Kohut and Segars’ (1992) theme of product-market mix and unfavorable and favorable financial reference, respectively. Company profile was a newly emerging theme, which did not appear in Kohut and Segars’ (1992) categorization system. Words such as “China” and “industry” were identified.

With the use of the Concordance function of WordSmith Tools 6.0, a trained coder examined the congruence of the keywords with the adapted themes, and unfolded the ranking of the adapted themes. Table II provides a summary of the adapted themes and theme-related keywords in Chinese and English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Keywords in English</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Keywords in Chinese</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>發展 (development)</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>公司 (company)</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>企業 (corporate/group)</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>業務 (business)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>社會 (society)</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Market</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>中國 (China)</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Continue</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>員工 (employee)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>管理 (management)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>經營 (operate)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>創新 (innovative)</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>持續 (sustainable)</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>新 (new)</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>市場 (market)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>成為 (becoming)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Value</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>大 (huge)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>經濟 (economy)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Shareholder</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>不斷 (continuous)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>World</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>全球 (global)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Resource</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>積極 (aggressive)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Product</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>股東 (shareholder)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>責任 (responsible)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>努力 (effort)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Enterprise</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>實現 (achieve)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Effort</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>環境 (environment)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>價值 (value)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>投資 (investment)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>服務 (service)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Future</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>資源 (resource)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Improve</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>集團 (group)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>領域 (international)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** Only content words in the leader messages and addresses were included. The keywords are listed based on the frequency of use. Keywords appearing in different morphological forms with the same meanings are grouped under one category.

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Table I. Key lexical terms generated based on the frequency of use by WordSmith.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency of keyword, no. of keywords and dominant keywords in English</th>
<th>Dominant English keywords in their related themes (n)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Frequency of keyword, no. of keywords and dominant keywords in Chinese</th>
<th>Dominant Chinese keywords in their related themes (n)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company development</td>
<td>Freq: 546; keywords: 30; dominant keywords: 15</td>
<td>Development, business, group, company, continue, new, management, growth, resource, financial, enterprise, effort, future, improve, strategy (15)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Freq: 552; keywords: 30; dominant keywords: 17</td>
<td>發展(development), 公司(company), 業務(business), 管理(management), 經營(operate), 持續(sustainable), 新(new), 成為(becoming), 大(huge), 不斷(continuous), 積極( aggressive), 努力( effort), 實現(achieve), 投資( investment), 資源(resource), 集團(group), 國際(international) (17)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating philosophy</td>
<td>Freq: 241; keywords: 27; dominant keywords: 6</td>
<td>Employee, corporate, value, work, shareholder, customer (6)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Freq: 356; keywords: 30; dominant keywords: 7</td>
<td>企業( corporation), 社會(society), 員工( employee), 創新( innovative), 股東( shareholder), 責任( responsible), 價值( value) (7)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company profile</td>
<td>Freq: 198; keywords: 26; dominant keywords: 3</td>
<td>China, industry, world (3)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Freq: 208; keywords: 29; dominant keywords: 7</td>
<td>中國( China) (1)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business environment</td>
<td>Freq: 172; keywords: 25; dominant keywords: 4</td>
<td>Market, global, economic, opportunity (4)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Freq: 131; keywords: 21; dominant keywords: 3</td>
<td>市場( market), 經濟( economy), 環境( environment) (3)</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corporate performance</td>
<td>Freq: 122; keywords: 24; dominant keywords: 0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Freq: 133; keywords: 25; dominant keywords: 1</td>
<td>全球( global) (1)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product and service</td>
<td>Freq: 103; keywords: 19; dominant keywords: 2</td>
<td>Product, service (2)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Freq: 43; keywords: 15; dominant keywords: 1</td>
<td>服務( service) (1)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similar to Conaway and Wardrope (2010), who identified eight themes in CEO letters in Latin American and North American companies, and found that some frequent keywords were subsumed under each theme using open coding, for instance, phrases such as “natural disasters,” “regional stability” and “current political condition” came under the theme of external environment; our study also identified six prominent themes through the concordance analysis. The predominant themes in both English and Chinese were, in order of importance, company development, operating philosophy, company profile, business environment, corporate performance, and product and service.

Company development places strong emphasis on progress, using keywords such as “development,” “continue,” “effort,” “improve” and “growth,” with less emphasis on end results such as “rapidly expanding markets” as identified by Kohut and Segars (1992). Operating philosophy is associated with keywords like “employee,” “shareholder” and “customer,” in which importance is given to different groups of stakeholders. Company profile was the third salient theme identified. Words such as “China,” “industry” and “world” were identified, suggesting a global intention of corporations to move onto the international platform. Business environment ranked the same as company profile in the English messages and performance in the Chinese messages. This theme is connected to keywords like “market,” “environment” and “economy,” highlighting the importance of the economy and the market. The themes of corporate performance and product and service were the least prominent.

5.4 RQ3: keywords and themes reflecting the cultural values of leaders in Greater China when communicating with stakeholders from diverse countries

A noteworthy finding was that the most common keywords in both English and Chinese messages were instrumental, such as “development,” “business,” “company” and “market.” This corroborates Leung’s (2008) finding that Chinese business behavior is driven by the competitive business climate.

It however appears that different language styles were used for communicating with domestic and non-domestic stakeholders. Some English keywords such as “opportunity,” “customer” and “strategy” were not found in the Chinese keyword list, which suggests that the language style of the English version was quite different from the corresponding Chinese version. English keywords such as “growth,” “financial” and “strategy” emphasize instrumental benefits, but other English keywords are more concerned with the interests of customers and employees such as staff engagement words like “resource,” “value” and “customer.” In general, the English messages were more concerned with the corporation’s business operations and nature. The practice of communicating in a factual, direct and business-like manner in the English version of messages in Greater China corporations might have stemmed from these corporations’ perception that non-domestic English-speaking stakeholders (i.e. predominantly US stakeholders) tend to be direct, concise and result-oriented in communicating with stakeholders. This is consistent with Singh et al. (2005), who note that the US websites tend to be more direct, result-oriented and logical with less emphasis on wordy explanations and tradition. Chinese corporate leaders might also be less inclined to impose their cultural values (i.e. high power distance and collectivism, high-context communication), which are intertwined with their linguistic style, onto their low power distance English-speaking stakeholders, who often believe in individualism. As such, Chinese leaders tend to downplay their authority and do not elaborate on history and tradition in their English version of messages. Singh et al. (2003) also found that the Chinese advertising websites of American companies were infused with Chinese cultural values such as collectivism and high-context culture than the domestic American websites, which indicates that American companies localized their communication to suit the needs of their Chinese stakeholders. Likewise, this provides
support for the notion that Greater China corporations tend to culturally adapt the content of their messages to their non-domestic stakeholders. In other words, the choice of keywords could reflect the manipulation of language devices to address different stakeholders from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

In contrast, for the Chinese messages, keywords such as “management,” “aggressive” and “operate” emphasized the power, status and authority of leaders with these words indicating the top-down management approach in leading the corporation to new heights and the importance of hierarchical relationships in the Chinese culture (Hofstede, 1997), while words such as “society,” “responsible,” “group” and “employee” reflected collectivism and warm regard for stakeholders. This is echoed by Singh et al. (2005), who noted that Chinese websites tend to display high levels of power distance, and Singh et al. (2003), who found that Chinese advertising websites of American companies exhibited collectivism. As Singh et al. (2005) noted, the local websites of Chinese companies reflected cultural values of the country including high power distance and a focus on tradition and relationships. In most Chinese-based corporations, stakeholders share common cultural values, such as high power distance and collectivism, with their leaders (Hofstede, 1997), and leaders can freely assert their leadership. Leaders are also more elaborate as they use slogans, couplets, cultural symbols, emphasize company history and tradition, and disclose additional information about challenges faced when communicating with Chinese-speaking stakeholders, as well as express gratitude to them, in line with collectivism (Hofstede, 1980), particularism which values relationships over rules (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2012) and the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) which found that the Chinese focus on respect for superiors (i.e. stakeholders) and harmony with others. The fact that China is a high-context culture (Hall, 1959) also means that an emphasis on feelings is culturally familiar (Wurtz, 2005).

6. Discussion
The primary focus of our study was to examine the characteristics of Chinese leaders’ bilingual web-based messages to identify the predominant themes in Chinese leader-stakeholder communication since a research study on this aspect is lacking. These themes would reveal the keywords and theme-related content based on the messages found on corporate websites from leaders of corporations to their stakeholders in Greater China. Our intention was also to infer the cultural values reflected in leaders’ messages and whether the values depicted would vary in the Chinese and corresponding English version of messages.

6.1 Variation of the six predominant themes in different language modes
We identified the six predominant themes of company development, operating philosophy, company profile, business environment, corporate performance, and product and service. The first two themes were consistent with those identified in 2010, but business environment and company profile were more predominant in 2013 (Ngai and Singh, 2014). The commonly used themes are shown in Figure 1 according to their order of importance in different language modes.

Company development was the most prominent theme, which emphasized progress and future plans. Less emphasis was placed on end results. This is likely because Chinese stakeholders prefer messages where “very little is the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” (Hall, 1959, p. 91), and any factual information given is implicitly expressed (Locker and Kaczmarek, 2007). Hofstede et al.’s (2010) uncertainty avoidance notion could explain why predictions about performance are rarely provided, given that China scores medium on uncertainty avoidance and any speculations about performance may prove to be risky.
Operating philosophy was the second most predominant theme, and an emphasis on various stakeholders was placed including “employee,” “shareholder” and “customer.” This indicates that the stakeholder perspective is adopted in which relationships with different stakeholders are viewed as important (Guest, 1999; Hitt et al., 2005). The use of “commitment” and “quality” under company development highlights the importance of the stakeholder perspective. The stakeholder perspective is relevant to leader communication since taking into account various stakeholders’ interests serves a strategic purpose in gaining trust from them to achieve the corporate strategy (Forman and Argenti, 2005; Freeman, 1984). In addition, leaders in Greater China are collectivistic (Hofstede, 1997), so by focusing on different stakeholders, they are better able to strengthen relations with them.

Company profile was the next prominent theme with keywords such as “China” and “world” used, indicating Chinese corporations’ aspirations to break into the international market (Wu, 2008). By articulating global aspirations explicitly, stakeholders can know more about the goals of the corporation. Under company profile, a summary of past milestones, achievements made and the history of the corporation were given, which suggests an orientation toward the past. Singh et al.’s (2003, 2005) studies lend support to this finding in that they found that Chinese websites tend to use more Chinese cultural symbols such as the Great Wall of China, and emphasize tradition and history.

Concerning the theme of business environment, Greater China corporations adopt a success-oriented approach as keywords such as “market,” “environment” and “opportunity” were apparent. This theme has become dominant since more external environmental factors affect a corporation’s performance such as the global economic crisis of 2009 and natural disasters. Indeed, the use of strategically designed messages by leaders is important, given that there are increasing social, economic and political changes worldwide (Falkheimer, 2014). Conaway and Wardrope (2010) concur that the business environment and economic conditions influenced the way annual report letters were written by CEOs of corporations in the USA and Latin America. Leaders are increasingly expected to allay stakeholders’ anxiety about the effect of negative environmental factors on the corporation’s performance and instill confidence in stakeholders on how they would handle these adverse factors, should they arise (Conaway and Wardrope, 2010).
The theme of corporate performance was ranked the second lowest for the English messages while it was ranked the third lowest for the Chinese messages, which may be due to the medium level of uncertainty avoidance and high power distance in Greater China (Hofstede, 1997). Leaders are reluctant to explicitly communicate bad performance news, or speculate on very ambitious future plans that may worry stakeholders unnecessarily. They prefer to divert stakeholders’ attention with neutral, forward-looking themes like progress embedded in the theme of company development. Under this theme, appreciation for stakeholders’ support was more predominant in the Chinese messages. This is attributed to the finding that the Chinese are more cordial and collectivistic (Hofstede, 1997) and tend to speak more fervently to people they know (insiders) while they avoid speaking to strangers (outsiders/foreigners) (Gao and Ting-Toomey, 1998). This tendency is tied to the concept of guanxi (personal connections), which refers to the notion that the Chinese are likely to develop closer relations with their Chinese friends and workplace counterparts through guanxi (Fang and Faure, 2011). The theme of product and service was ranked the lowest with an emphasis on the history of development of products and services. Stakeholders can easily obtain factual product and service information on corporate websites and, as such, leaders are not likely to communicate information about products in their messages.

Based on the above, corporate leaders strategically design their web-based messages to communicate more than factual information to stakeholders in that they serve to influence stakeholders’ attitudes and opinions to generate support for corporate policies as echoed by Conaway and Wardrope (2010). For instance, leaders strategically select certain themes but omit others such that negative news and speculations on future performance are underemphasized, while progress, the importance of environmental and market factors, and the intentions of corporations to expand globally are given emphasis to influence stakeholders’ views about corporate objectives. This suggests that leaders’ communication in the form of web-based messages and the corporation’s strategy are closely inter-related as corroborated by Forman and Argenti (2005). In addition to this, similar themes exist across both English and Chinese messages while the keywords are instrumental, suggesting that economic factors prevail over other factors in determining the way leaders communicate with most non-domestic and domestic stakeholders (Leung, 2008; Osnos, 2014). Despite this, some cultural variations are observed since corporations elaborate on their tradition and history in addition to expressing appreciation to domestic stakeholders when compared with non-domestic stakeholders, which will be elaborated in the following section.

6.2 Variation in leaders’ language style underpinned by different cultural values

An important observation was that there was some indication of cultural adaptation used by leaders in Greater China corporations in their Chinese vs corresponding English version of messages on their websites. In the Chinese messages intended for domestic stakeholders, the keywords focused on the authority of leaders in managing and leading the corporation coupled with conveying affection and gratitude for their stakeholders’ support with more details given to them such as company history, and the use of slogans, couplets and cultural symbols. This finding echoes Conaway and Wardrobe’s (2010) study, which noted that cultural values were exhibited in Latin American letters including the expression of gratitude to stakeholders and warmth and collectivism as opposed to the US ones in their comparison of these countries’ CEO annual report letters.

In most Chinese-based corporations, domestic stakeholders share common cultural values, such as high power distance, medium uncertainty avoidance and collectivism (Hofstede, 1980) with their leaders, so leaders can freely assert their leadership and authority in their messages. Leaders are also more elaborate and informative when communicating to Chinese-speaking stakeholders and tend to be indirect and vague, focusing on developing
goodwill, and expressing gratitude to them, in line with high-context communication (Hall, 1959, 1976) and Singh et al.’s (2003, 2005) studies. In Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s (2012) model, the Chinese scored relatively high on particularism, which may help to explain why leader messages seek to bond with their domestic stakeholders, and, therefore, appear to be more cordial. For example, the factual business-like approach in English messages reveals the noticeable low frequency of English keywords concerning corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability, ranked 82 and 133, respectively, in the English frequency wordlist of WordSmith 6.0, although they were ranked high (CSR ranked 11 and sustainability ranked 21) in the Chinese keyword list. The high ranking of CSR and sustainability in the Chinese keyword list suggests that Chinese leaders are more communicative to their Chinese stakeholders, while also conforming to popular world practices which are inextricably linked to a growing awareness of ethical consumerism, environmental issues and sustainability (Harzing and Pinnington, 2011).

In contrast, the use of cultural adaptation was observed in the corresponding English version of messages. In comparison with the Chinese versions, the corresponding English messages were more concise, precise, factual, result-driven with instrumental and pragmatic outcome-related keywords used, such as “customers,” “opportunities,” “market,” “industry,” “benefit” and “product.” Of course, the emphasis placed on outcomes related to market-based performance suggests that the shareholder perspective is dominant (Paauwe, 2004), in which outcomes are viewed as important by shareholders, are highlighted by leaders. However, this practice might also stem from leaders’ communication function which is tied to their corporate strategy (Forman and Argenti, 2005) in that leaders may just prefer to disseminate important and result-oriented information to stakeholders and do not want to impose their cultural values onto their low power distance English-speaking stakeholders, who they often perceive as adhering to individualism and low-context communication, so leaders play down their authority when communicating with them and tend to use more direct, concise, factual and success-oriented language, which is in line with Singh et al.’s (2003, 2005) and Conaway and Wardrope’s (2010) studies. For example, Singh et al. (2003) found that American companies adapted the advertising content on their Chinese websites to conform to Chinese values such as collectivism and tradition with the use of Chinese symbols such as the Great Wall of China and Chinese festivals to localize their communication to the Chinese, whereas for their domestic American websites, they asserted their individualism and disseminated direct, precise information with less imagery and a less-decorative tone. This lends support to the argument that cultural adaptation of messages for stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds is seen not only in advertising but also in web-based messages of corporate leaders and supports Singh et al.’s (2003) and Barber and Badre’s (1998) findings that the web is not a culturally neutral platform.

7. Implications and further research

Our study has shed light on the emerging field of knowledge concerning web-based messages on corporate websites with respect to identifying the predominant themes in Chinese leaders’ messages in Greater China corporations. The flourishing of the internet has led to the increased use of web-based messages as a strategic communication tool by corporations (Zorn, 2001), and no other studies were conducted on this topic, so our study has important practical implications. First, it indicates that the strategically designed messages from leaders of corporations in Greater China in 2013 primarily contained the themes of company development, operating philosophy, company profile and business environment. Multinational corporations aiming to enter the market of the Greater China region should therefore adopt these themes as our findings suggest that they are the most prevalent and acceptable. As stakeholders are critical to organizational success (Freeman, 1984; Heath, 1997;
Kitchen and Schultz, 2001), leaders are expected to strategically incorporate these themes into their messages when they communicate with stakeholders.

Business environment is a newly emerging theme, which suggests that leaders are increasingly expected to communicate the challenges faced in the global business economy and address external environmental factors (Falkheimer, 2014) impacting corporations such as the H1N1 bird flu epidemic and economic crises in order to reduce stakeholders’ anxiety about corporate performance and assure stakeholders (Conaway and Wardrope, 2010). Leung (2008) suggests that the forces of globalization coupled with the business climate may have an impact on the business behavior of the Chinese leaders since they are expected to be more responsive to the competitive business climate, and economic and market factors seem to determine the way messages are crafted by Chinese leaders (Osinos, 2014).

The themes identified also indicate that leaders tend to strategically select certain themes while they deliberately avoid some themes to influence their stakeholders’ attitudes and behavior, and this provides support for the idea that leaders’ communication and the implementation of the corporate strategy are closely aligned (Forman and Argenti, 2005) to achieve certain effects in stakeholders. For instance, negative news and predictions about future performance are underemphasized while progress, the importance of environmental and market factors and the intentions of corporations to expand globally are given more emphasis. The findings of this study should inspire more research addressing these themes in corporations in Greater China.

More importantly, our study revealed differences in the way web-based messages were culturally adapted to domestic vs non-domestic stakeholders. Chinese messages intended for domestic stakeholders tend to be wordy, emphasizing the power of the leader and focusing on tradition and company history to generate a local feeling of the culture apart from disseminating information about the corporation. All of this suggests a high-context communication, collectivism and high power distance. This is congruent with Singh et al. (2003, 2005) and Conaway and Wardrope (2010) who found that the web and CEO annual report letters, respectively, are not culturally neutral platforms in that corporations tend to customize their messages to the cultural values of their target audience, and websites/letters exhibit the cultural values of a certain country. The strategic importance of tailor-making messages to one’s culture is significant for both non-domestic and domestic stakeholders, so leaders and practitioners ought to culturally adapt their messages to audiences from diverse countries or regions. If messages are culturally adapted, they may enhance the global competitiveness of corporations (Singh et al., 2003). In fact, researchers such as Barber and Badre (1998), Fock (2000) and Simon (2000) have found that culturally customized web content can increase usability, access and interaction, instill positive feelings and hence generate more business activities.

Closely related to this issue is the observation that since leaders may assume that most English-speaking stakeholders are low on the power distance and collectivism dimensions as well as being low-context communicators, they may be disinclined to impose their cultural values, which inform their linguistic style, onto their English-speaking stakeholders. They may therefore only disseminate fact-based, clear and concise information in the English version of their messages, which adheres to the perspective of the shareholder (Paauwe, 2004). When communicating with high-PDI Chinese stakeholders, leaders are less hesitant to articulate their cultural values, such as power distance and collectivism. This may bring about a misconception that Chinese leaders tend to convey more information to domestic stakeholders, and are less communicative with non-domestic stakeholders, but in reality, this is due to cultural values that are inextricably linked to the linguistic style. Multinational corporations aiming to enter the Greater China market should be aware that these cultural values might underpin the communication practices of leaders.
8. Limitations
Despite the major findings, this study has some limitations. First, only 32 messages were included although these messages were identified from top-performing corporations in major regions within Greater China, so our findings on the predominant themes cannot be generalized to all leader messages in the regions of Greater China. This study is, however, meaningful as one of only few to examine the growing trend of web-based leader communication in Greater China corporations. Second, we did not empirically investigate the cultural adaptation of Chinese websites to their domestic and non-domestic stakeholders, so our explanations were only inferred based on the existing literature. Researchers could undertake content analysis to analyze the cultural values depicted in the messages of leaders intended for domestic and non-domestic stakeholders. In spite of all the limitations, we have been able to identify the commonly used themes embedded in Chinese leaders’ communication as an alternative to that of Kohut and Segars (1992), although our identified themes require further testing for reliability and validity. In addition, our study is meaningful with respect to investigating the differences in the depiction of cultural values in Greater China corporations’ web-based messages intended for domestic and non-domestic stakeholders.

9. Conclusion
In short, our findings provide support for the idea that Chinese corporate web-based messages intended for different stakeholders focus on similar themes, since economic factors and the business environment dictate the strategic direction of corporations and determine what they should communicate to stakeholders. However, leaders not only communicate factual information about themes to stakeholders to influence their opinions of the corporation, but they also strategically choose certain themes or avoid some others to influence their stakeholders’ perception of the corporation. These possibilities for enhanced knowledge on the part of stakeholders and leaders may potentially enhance academic appreciation of the complexities embedded in corporate communication. There are also cultural variations in messages intended for domestic vs non-domestic stakeholders. Chinese leaders tend to convey culturally embedded values such as collectivism, particularism and high power distance in their messages to their domestic stakeholders through the use of certain keywords and language choices while they accommodate their communication style to their non-domestic stakeholders by being direct, result-oriented and concise. As Barber and Badre (1998) note, stakeholders can identify with messages/websites that give them a feeling of their own culture. In view of this, it is quite evident that leaders’ communication in Greater China corporations is integrated with their corporate strategy to mold and influence their stakeholders’ opinions from diverse regions, and the strategic importance of tailor-making messages to stakeholders from diverse cultural backgrounds should not be underestimated.

References


**Further reading**

### Table AI.

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<td>CITIC Pacific Limited</td>
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Reading beyond the lines
Appendix 2

Keywords in English | Keywords in Chinese
---|---
Development | Social | 發展 | 資本
Business | Create | 公司 | 品質
Group | Good | 企業 | 堅持
Company | More | 業務 | 工作
China | Energy | 社會 | 風險
Market | Look | 中國 | 作為
Continue | Time | 員工 | 國內
New | Achieve | 管理 | 成長
Industry | Core | 經濟 | 策略
Management | Government | 創新 | 更加
Growth | Asset | 持續 | 核心
Global | Brand | 新 | 領先
Employee | First | 市場 | 好
Corporate | Partner | 成為 | 營運
Value | Property | 大 | 行業
Work | Promote | 經濟 | 策略
Shareholder | Believe | 不斷 | 節能
World | Build | 全球 | 取得
Resource | Full | 積極 | 支持
Product | Further | 股東 | 效率
Service | Holding | 責任 | 獲得
Financial | Life | 努力 | 農業
Enterprise | Limited | 實現 | 通過
Effort | Metal | 環境 | 需求
Economic | Need | 價值 | 優質
Opportunity | Overseas | 投資 | 財
Customer | Result | 服務 | 房地產
Future | Sustainable | 資源 | 提高
Improve | Actively | 集團 | 治理
Strategy | Ahead | 國際 | 理念

Table AII.
Keyword list generated by WordSmith Tools 6.0 for interviewees’ comment

About the authors
Cindy Sing-Bik Ngai (PhD) is an Assistant Professor and a Programme Leader of MA in Bilingual Corporate Communication at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her research interests include bilingual communication in the corporate context, leader communication and intercultural communication in new media. Cindy has published two research books titled New Trends in Corporate Communication: Language, Strategies and Practices (2012) and Role of Language & Corporate Communication in Greater China: From Academic to Practitioner Perspectives (2015). Her work has also appeared in peer-reviewed international journals like Journal of Business and Technical Communication, International Journal of Business Communication, Public Relations Review and Babel. Cindy Sing-Bik Ngai is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: cindy.sb.ngai@polyu.edu.hk

Rita Gill Singh is a Senior Lecturer in the Language Centre at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU). She teaches undergraduate academic English and business communication courses. She has published papers in the Journal of Business and Technical Communication and International Journal of Business Communication. Her research interests include corporate communication, web-based language learning and materials development.

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Identifying competence characteristics for excellent communication professionals

A work field perspective

Melissa Fuller
Department of Communication Science, University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands and
Research Center Excellence in Higher Education and Society, Hanzehogeschool Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Marjolein Heijne-Penninga and Elanor Kamans
Research Center Excellence in Higher Education and Society, Hanzehogeschool Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Mark van Vuuren and Menno de Jong
Department of Communication Science, University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands, and
Marca Wolfensberger
Research Center Excellence in Higher Education and Society, Hanzehogeschool Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands and Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to clarify which knowledge, skills and behaviors are used to describe excellent performance in professional communication. As the demand for talented communication professionals increases, organizations and educators need an empirically defined set of performance criteria to guide the development of (potentially) excellent communication professionals (ECPs). This research aimed to render a competence profile which could assist in the development of recruitment, training and development to develop relevant programs for high-potential communication practitioners.

Design/methodology/approach – This mixed-method research was approached in two phases: first, a series of focus groups (n = 16) were held to explore work field perspectives resulting in a concept profile, and second, a series of expert panels (n = 30) following the Delphi method were conducted to determine the extent of agreement with the findings.

Findings – Participants clarified that excellent performance is characterized by competences which transcend normative technical skills or practical communication knowledge. The five domains, 16 item “SEEDS” competence profile describes that ECPs are distinguished by their compounded ability to be strategic, empathic, expressive, and decisive and to see patterns and interrelationships.

Research limitations/implications – Although a broad range of relevant professionals were involved in both phases, the study could be considered limited in size and scope. Research was conducted in one national setting therefore further research would be necessary to confirm generalizability of the results to other cultural contexts.

Originality/value – Although many competence frameworks exist which describe normative performance in this profession, specific criteria which illustrate excellent performance have not yet been identified. This competence profile clarifies characteristics which typify excellent performance in professional communication.
communication and can be helpful to educators and employers who wish to identify and create suitable training programs for ECPs.

**Keywords** Research, Career development, Communication excellence, Communication practitioner

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

We often hear about a “war for talent”: organizations engaged in a battle to hire the best and brightest professionals in their industry. These professionals excel at their tasks: they are regarded as initiators of innovation, leaders in their fields and inspirations to their colleagues. As they contend with new technology, economic pressure, and constant societal change, organizations need excellent professionals to craft effective strategy and tools to respond to these complex, interdisciplinary challenges (Stahl *et al.*, 2012). It is therefore no surprise that organizations are increasingly focused on finding and leveraging their talents to achieve their strategic, economic and societal goals (Combs *et al.*, 2006; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Lawrence, 2015).

Regrettably, identifying the professionals who excel in managing these organizational demands is difficult (Wooldridge, 2006; Nilsson and Ellström, 2012). Although variables to identify excellent communication departments have been empirically defined (Verčič and Zerfass, 2016), specific competences which can be used to describe the individual who performs at an excellent level are not as clear. So, what is an excellent communication professional (ECP)? What competences do they possess and display which distinguish them as excellent and make them especially suited to excel at accomplishing these complex tasks? This exploratory research investigated the characteristics of an excellent individual communication practitioner, with the aim to assist organizations and educational institutions to more effectively steer their identification, training, and development efforts.

### Excellence in professional communication

Professional communication is an overarching term for a range of vocations focused on creating “purpose-driven communication” through writing, speaking, visual design, relationship management and change activities both in- and external to organizations (Schriver, 2012, p. 276). Communication professionals (CPs) work in every imaginable sector in the public, private, non-profit, and governmental spheres. A CP could be seen as the “voice” of an organization, tasked to engage with publics internally and externally, both on and off line. In Europe, the function of the CP is evolving from being mainly operational into a vital strategic position, with increasingly complex responsibilities evaluating and aligning strategic goals and stakeholder demands, educating and supervising staff, and managing change and crises (Zerfass *et al.*, 2012). The vital role of the CP is becoming more visible, as when organizations manage communication poorly, implications can be devastating not only for the organization, but for individuals, society, and the environment; for example, the recent notable cases of communication failure at ENRON (Seeger and Ulmer, 2003), BP’s Deepwater Horizon (De Wolf and Mejri, 2013) and Fukushima (Perko, 2016).

Many scholars have described aspects of excellence in the context of the communication profession. Possibly the most widely referenced is Grunig’s (1992) Excellence Theory, which describes three interacting spheres which influence excellent communication departmental performance: knowledge which exists within the communication department, the link between a communication department and senior management, and the environment or culture wherein these are imbedded. Although this theory describes excellence at departmental, organizational and cultural levels, it does not clarify with specificity the qualities of the individual practitioners within these spheres.

From another perspective, ECPs have been described as the “leaders” at the top of their field (Meng and Berger, 2013). Communication leaders display six major competence
dimensions (self-dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship building, strategic decision-making capability, and communication knowledge management capability) which have direct influence on not only professional outcomes, but also sphere of influence in the organizational context. Meng and Berger (2013) provide some insight into high level performance competences, however their focus lies predominantly with aspects of leadership as related to excellent performance. Although these specific leadership skills and being an ECP could be synonymous, however, one could question whether being an excellent leader or manager and being an ECP is one and the same. In the current research, we look at performance from a broader perspective, exploring competences beyond displaying strong leadership or managerial skills, as we argue that even professionals in a subordinate function could be excellent despite not fulfilling a supervisory or coordinating role, and that there could be additional performance or aspects of competence which are equally or more relevant for someone to be considered excellent in this field.

Recently, Tench et al. (2017) proposed a description of excellent communication based upon decades of research from European organizations. In their model, they discuss how high-level communication is accomplished at three levels from the individual, to the department and then the organization. In their research, they describe CPs who excel as ambitious professionals who are “sagatious, linked, and solid.” This infers that an excellent CP should possess additional competences or traits beyond what is normally expected from a competent CP. Their research indicates that focus on the individuals within the team is an important factor in building a strong department, and this confirms a relevant need to investigate which specific competences should be used upon which to base selection, recruitment and eventual training initiatives.

Professional communication competences
Competences are a coherent set of specific skills, knowledge, attitudes (SKA’s) and demonstrable outputs which are integral to performance in a particular professional function (Boyatzis, 2008; Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011; Mulder, 2014). Competences should be measurable against a standard, or framework, and improvable through training and development (Lucia and Lepsinger, 1999). Furthermore, focusing upon the competences needed to perform well professionally instead of requirements for a specific role is advantageous, as competences describe more foundational aspects which tend to remain relatively constant whereas role descriptions fluctuate regularly (Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011).

Beginning with Broom and Smith’s (1979) proposal of four main roles for CPs, there has been an increasing drive to identify the specific competences which could best prepare professionals for their work tasks, both from education and the professional field. In the Communication field, competences have been described from functional, national and international perspectives, at varying educational levels or professional contexts. The focus of the matrices is diverse: some matrices describe SKA’s through experience levels from novice to senior functions (Logeion, 2015; Global Alliance, 2015; International Association of Business Communicators, 2016; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016), others focus on describing competences attributed to a variety of roles which practitioners fulfill (Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011; Logeion, 2015; Tench and Moreno, 2015) and still others describe end level competence requirements related to expected attainment of competences at different educational end levels (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008; National Communication Association, 2015; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2016). Descriptions of competence can be applied to both national (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008; Vereniging Hogescholen, 2016; Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011; Logeion, 2015; National Communication Association, 2015; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016, and international contexts (Zerfass et al., 2012; Tench and Moreno, 2015; Global Alliance, 2015; International Association
of Business Communicators, 2016). Although hardly an exhaustive list of all available communication competence profiles, the models reviewed for this study provide a broad general indication of the variety of specific skills, knowledge and attitude aspects which could be relevant for the CP.

When reviewing the content of the profiles, there appear to be seven main competence domains, namely: theoretical aspects of the communication discipline, technical communication skills, organizational environment and processes, peripheral context, research and analytical ability, interpersonal aptitude, personality or character traits. Within these matrices, there is significant variation. While one matrix explains requirements of a competence area in detail, others present the required competence in more general terms.

For example, while all explain that knowledge of communication theory is important for a general practitioner, some state that familiarity with the history of the profession is integral (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2016; Global Alliance, 2015) or give examples of specific areas of theory which should be stressed, such as lobbying (Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011) or crisis management (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016). Technical skills required for standard performance also vary, with some matrices stressing the ability to apply general skills to “create messages appropriate to the audience purpose and context” (National Communication Association, 2015) or “produce and deliver effective messages” (Zerfass et al., 2012) and others listing specific skills to be mastered, such as presentation skills (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008), persuasive writing (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016), or the use of media and social channels (Global Alliance, 2015). General knowledge of the organizational environment and processes are covered by nearly all, however some stress project management skills very specifically (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008; Global Alliance, 2015; International Association of Business Communicators, 2016). Nearly all matrices include factors relating to understanding the external environment or peripheral context, highlighting requisite knowledge and ability to consider society, culture and the community, however some profiles ask for specific consideration for understanding trends (Logeion, 2015; Tench and Moreno, 2015) identity issues (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2016) or ethics (National Communication Association, 2015; Global Alliance, 2015; International Association of Business Communicators, 2016; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016). Research and analytical skills were explained in some form within all matrices. In the area of interpersonal aptitude, some descriptions emphasized managing or building relationships with stakeholders (Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011; Global Alliance, 2015; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016), advisory skill (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008), displaying empathy or empathic antenna (Zerfass et al., 2012; Tench et al., 2013), or the ability to communicate in more than one language (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008). Personality and character traits are mentioned in all profiles, for example, aspects such as self-efficacy (National Communication Association, 2015), curiosity (Tench and Moreno, 2015) being entrepreneurial (Vereniging Hogescholen 2008; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016).

While these matrices cover diverse areas of competences, no profile highlighted what it means to display excellent performance in any way. They remain limited to definitions of increasing levels of standard, normative performance throughout a professionals’ career or education, and did not clarify what talent or excellent performance within these levels entails. In other fields, research which defines the constructs of excellent performance is emerging (Paans et al., 2013; Witte and Jansen, 2015; Van Heugten et al., 2016). However, a similar framework specific to the communication profession has not been defined. This is problematic for organizations which want to select and train CPs based upon competences relevant for excellence.
Talent and excellence
Although organizations and institutions may differ in how they describe excellent performance or professional talent (Tansley, 2011), commonly they refer to how well an individual performs at their assigned task or their professional performance in general (Nilsson and Ellström, 2012). More than just content experts or highly experienced staff, excellent professionals possess a special “combination of tacit and explicit knowledge, behaviour and skills, that gives someone the potential for effectiveness in task performance” (Draganidis and Mentzas, 2006, p. 5). These individuals have further been described as possessing high level performance capabilities such as meta-cognitive knowledge, professional engagement, situational awareness and autonomy (Sternberg, 2001; Renzulli, 2003; Feltovich et al., 2006; Goleman, 2006). Generally, performers who excel are more skilled than average performers in empathy, societal and contextual awareness, and relationship management competencies (Bambacas and Patrickson, 2008; Boyatzis, 2008; Howard and Bray, 1988; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Westerhoudt, 2008). This is relevant in the Communication field, as without developed empathic skills, professionals are not able to effectively translate stakeholder intentions into appropriate messages while reflecting organizational responsibilities, norms and goals, especially imperative during often emotional projects involving conflict and change (Goleman, 2006; Kellett et al., 2006; De Jong and Lentz, 2007; Lentz and De Jong, 2009).

Gifted is often a term used synonymously with talent and excellence. Research indicates that gifted individuals differ significantly from their peers in factors essential for achievement in professional practice, specifically in terms of intelligence, creative thinking, openness to experience, desire to learn and motivation to excel (Scager et al., 2012). Gifted individuals express superior natural abilities in their field and are among the top 10 percent of their peers when compared by intellectual, creative, socio-affective, or sensorimotor aptitude (Gagné, 2004).

Aim of the current study
Research therefore suggests that excellent performance is much broader than just deep technical or practical knowledge, and that excellent individual professionals may or may not possess inherent aptitudes for specific performance areas. Regardless of the whether aspects of professional excellence are natural or learned, if organizations aim to select and manage talent, or an individual intends to develop into an excellent professional, then a set of criteria to describe excellent performance is a necessity (Nilsson and Ellström, 2012). Therefore, in this research we aim to explore which criteria could best be used to describe individual excellence in the Communication profession.

This exploratory study aimed to identify competences for excellent performance in professional communication using a mixed-method qualitative approach. The goal was to investigate the specific characteristics of excellent performance as valued by the professional field, and present these in the form of a conceptual profile which could be used to develop or improve the competences of focus in training and development programs. This lead to the following overarching question:

RQ1. According to the professional field, which competence characteristics typify an ECP?

Method
This mixed-method research was approached in two phases: first, three focus groups (FGs) were held to explore work field perspectives resulting in a concept competence profile, and second, a series of expert panels following the Delphi method were conducted to reach consensus about the relevant competences (Figure 1).
Phase 1: FGs

First, a series of FGs were conducted to explore a broad range of views about excellent performance in a field comprised of diverse occupations. We chose to use FGs as this is a suitable method for the exploratory nature of this phase. FG discussions prompt participants to interact and think aloud, evoke discussion and encourage commentary on each other’s views (Kitzinger, 1994; Burns and Bush, 2003). The discussion provides participants the means to interactively discuss a range of viewpoints and experiences on the topic of excellent performance and to help clarify group norms (Kitzinger, 1994; Lindhof and Taylor, 2002). This process reveals rich information that may not emerge in a survey or in individual in-depth interviews (Hennink et al., 2011) and can reveal insight and nuances which may be less accessible using other methods (Morgan, 1997).

Participants

Participants of the FGs (n = 16) were professionals working in the communication field in the Netherlands. A broad representation of individuals from the professional networks of the lecturers of our research institute, the institute’s advisory board, and members of national professional communication organizations were approached to participate. Inclusion criteria stipulated that participants possess enough relevant experience as CPs to express the differences between excellent and normative performance. By selecting participants from a broad range of communication professions and experience levels, the intention was to evoke discussion, debate and lively discourse from a variety of perspectives to arrive at conceptual definitions of excellent performance. Participants were recruited from a variety of occupations within organizational communication, marketing communication, public affairs, brand management, communication consulting, and multimedia design with responsibilities ranging from internal and external business communication, public relations, and multimedia content creation. Participants came from a variety of sectors: ICT, financial, government, marketing, retail, non-profit, education, training, services, event management and multimedia design. All were working in professional communication occupations: 6 as self-employed consultants (35 percent) and 11 employed by an organization (65 percent). Furthermore, selecting participants from throughout the country was essential to account for possible diversity in answers due to local professional culture. Participants were nearly equally distributed by gender (Female = 9, Male = 7) and ranged in age from 24 to 61 years old. Participants were informed of the nature of the research project and the intended methods in advance, and were provided with contact information to clarify any questions prior to the FG proceedings. Table I presents a summary of FG participant characteristics.
Procedure

Before the FGs occurred, a discussion guide was created. This discussion guide was used by the moderator to help introduce concepts, facilitate discussion and sustain focus upon the research topic during the FGs. The guide structured the approach to gathering information and to operationalized concepts found in literature concerning descriptions of normative communication competence, theory on excellent performance in professional communication contexts and educational theory regarding talent and giftedness development in general.

The first set of probes aimed to elicit examples of behavior, attitudes or knowledge which a CP displays that typify excellent performance to look for convergence or divergence with the available competence matrices (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2016; Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008; Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011; Zerfass et al., 2012; Logeion, 2015; National Communication Association, 2015; Tench and Moreno, 2015; Global Alliance, 2015; International Association of Business Communicators, 2016; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016). Next, the probes explored topics concerning professional talent and excellent performance in the context of the profession (Grunig, 1992; Nilsson and Ellström, 2012; Meng and Berger, 2013) and indicators of giftedness in general, such as knowledge, experience, interpersonal skills, situational awareness, and autonomy (Sternberg, 2001; Renzulli, 2003; Feltovich et al., 2006; Goleman, 2006).

Next, questions probed to what extent excellent behavior is classified by excelling in one specific area, or if there may be a combination of areas needed to be seen as excellent. Attention was also given to the contextual aspects of excellence, such as who determines whether or not a professional is excellent, if there is a correlation between someone’s personal background and his/her potential for excellence, and which factors may be generic or profession specific indicators of excellent performance. Closing questions covered the awareness of measures used to identify excellent performance within the profession or organization, as well suggestions for discussion topics which may have been missed or which deserved attention in further FGs.

Three FGs were held between January 2014 and April 2014 (N1: 3, N2: 6, N3: 7). All FGs lasted approximately 90 minutes and were recorded for later transcription. The sessions took place in quiet conference rooms at a university campus or conference center, and all occurred without disturbance. The moderator was selected from outside the communication profession. For consistency, the same moderator was present at all sessions to ensure that the same questions, process and protocols were applied to each group. A note taker was present as a non-participating observer, to ensure that all discussion was properly recorded and any additional relevant annotations were made. The moderator began each FG with the same question, specifically: “How would you describe excellent performance in the communication profession?”. To encourage response, participants were asked to envision a CP in their network whom they considered excellent, and then to give examples of behavior, skills or abilities which were indicative of excellent performance. Furthermore, participants were asked to describe the difference between normative and excellent performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Relevant professional experience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9 20-29</td>
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<td>4 Operational</td>
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<td>40-49</td>
<td>University (academic)</td>
<td>7 &gt; 10 years</td>
<td>7 Strategic</td>
<td>5 International 4</td>
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<td>50-59</td>
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<td>1 Director/Executive</td>
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Table I. Focus groups 1-3 participant composition
The moderator intervened minimally, and only to ensure that all topics were covered, clarify ambiguous terminology used by a participant or to redirect conversation if it diverged from the research topic. Care was taken to stimulate equivalent participation from all participants, explore difference of opinion and response diversity.

**Data analysis**

The analysis conducted using the systematic method of Grounded Theory using a continuous cycle of collecting and analyzing data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Four researchers independently coded the first transcript using Atlas.ti software, applying an inductive approach to identify codes and categories of concepts emerging from the data. Researchers then performed axial coding to categorize codes and concepts and group them into domains and subsequent items.

Following independent coding, a team consensus meeting was held wherein each researcher presented their own results to the research team. Results were compared and any discrepancies solved through discussion to maintain dialogical reliability (Sandberg, 1997). Next, the researchers paralleled the data set with relevant literature to look for contrasting information or similarities. Researchers discussed data arising from the verbatim text, as well as dynamics between participants, and variables such as emotion, frequency and specificity of response. After each FG, the research team evaluated whether there were aspects which required further attention in subsequent FGs. After any annotations were clarified, the next FG was organized.

The second FG was conducted, recorded, and transcribed, and another cycle of independent data analysis followed by a consensus meeting was repeated. After three FGs had been conducted and analyzed, the research team concluded that no new data were emerging from the discussions (cf. Hennink et al., 2011) and data collection concluded.

At this point, results from all three FGs were combined. Results were organized into a preliminary conceptual profile to be used in the second phase of the research.

**Phase 2: Delphi panel**

During the second phase, the concept profile was set before a panel of professionals ($n = 30$) according to the Delphi method. This method offers a structured approach to arrive at a statistical representation of the level of group consensus concerning a particular concept (Linstone and Turoff, 1975). The Delphi approach is a suitable method for this phase of the research as the aim was to verify whether the concepts to describe excellent performance emerging in the first phase were supported by a broader group of professionals. First, panelists are presented with a questionnaire and asked to assess the concept profile. Responses from the entire panel are analyzed to determine whether the panel responses converge. Should responses fall outside predetermined criteria, the questionnaire is amended and offered again to the panel for experts for review. This cycle continues until consensus by the panel is reached.

**Panelists**

Inclusion criteria for panelists specified selection of CPs and persons employed in senior roles who work closely with CPs. Panelists came from a broad range of sectors and occupied mid to senior level positions, including executives, managers, researchers, consultants and policy makers. All FG participants were excluded from participation in the panel. In total, 47 professionals were asked to join the panel, resulting in 30 responding panelists. As illustrated in Table II, panelists were evenly represented by gender (15/15) and ranged in age from 25 to 66 years old, with a majority (60 percent) of panelists between 30 and 49 years old. Panelists were predominantly highly experienced professionals, with more than...
65 percent having ten or more years of experience in the field. They represented a variety of sectors (medical, government, agriculture, services, education, multimedia, energy, non-profit, consultancy and IT) with half (16) holding a management position. All but one had completed tertiary education at an academic or higher professional level (29). Half (15) of the panelists conducted work on both the national and international level, and only three stated that their work was predominantly regional.

Procedure
Using the conceptual profile derived from the data in phase 1, an online survey instrument was constructed following the guidelines for the Delphi technique according to Lawshe (1975). The concept profile was presented in the form of an online questionnaire. Panelists were asked to give their opinion of whether the separate domains and items of the profile are essential characteristics of excellent performance, and whether the domain and item composition are comprehensive. First, they were asked to assess if the items and domains in the concept profile could be deemed “essential,” “important but not essential” or “not necessary” to characterize excellent performance. Subsequently, using a four-point Likert scale, panelists were asked if they “completely agree,” “agree,” “disagree” or “completely disagree” whether the items were located in the correct domains, and if the domain titles accurately described the items within it. The survey was available for response during a three-week period. After two weeks, non-responsive panelists were sent a reminder. Once the minimum of 66 percent response rate was reached, conclusions could be drawn from the results.

Data analysis
At the end of each Delphi round, content validity ratios (CVR) for each item were calculated using the formula where CVR represents the content validity ratio, $n_e =$ the number of panelists in the round who indicate a respective item or domain to be essential, and $N =$ the total number of panelists (Lawshe, 1975):

$$\text{CVR} = \frac{n_e - \left(\frac{N}{2}\right)}{N}$$

CVR values range from +1 to −1, with a value of +1 representing that all panelists indicate an item or domain to be “essential.” Values below zero (negative values) indicate panelists reject a domain or items for inclusion. In this research, only domains and items which were valued above 0.00 were included in the profile. Domain headings and items were changed if more than half of the panelists indicated rephrasing, repositioning or relabeling was necessary.

Following calculation, the research team examined the results and, if necessary, the profile was amended according to the guidelines of the Delphi method by removing rejected components, repositioning or relabeling domains and item locations. Adjustments to the concept profile were made based on analysis of the responses and a revised concept

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Table II. Delphi panel composition
profile was then set before the panelist in another round of the process. This cycle repeated until the panel concurred that all items and domains were suitable for inclusion in a final profile. In total, three Delphi panel rounds were conducted (Round 1 = 30, Round 2 = 23, Round 3 = 19). In all three rounds, the same group of panelists was approached until agreement was reached and a definitive profile established.

Results

In this section, the outcome of the FGs which formed the input for a concept profile will first be described and then the results of the Delphi rounds during which a final version of the profile was established.

Phase 1: FG results

In all FGs, the question arose whether being excellent meant that a professional was performing at a “level” higher than their peers who perform to standard. As competence standards exist for normal performance at various experience levels, could being excellence mean that one demonstrated higher level skill than is expected at their functional level or than their educational background would attest? Participants resolutely agreed that being excellent meant having qualities in addition to and beyond those expected for general, normative performers. It was specified that the practitioner could function at a normative level at their technical tasks, but that an excellent professional possessed and displayed additional competences beyond those expected. One participant offered that excellent performers possess “extra sensors” which make them more in tune with their environment than normal performers. Participants agreed that expertise (possessing depth of knowledge or skill in a specific area) was not the same as being excellent. According to the participants, an expert is a professional who “focuses on one thing” and “has deeper understanding about how one thing works,” and is someone who could be approached for “specific knowledge” about a subject. According to the participants, an excellent professional is something different: they are able to connect knowledge from several areas and can understand the “dynamic nature of a given (professional) situation.” Being an excellent professional is, therefore, determined by different characteristics than the depth or intensity of a professional’s technical knowledge.

Based on analysis of the FG data, a conceptual profile was developed consisting of 18 specific items grouped into five conceptual groups: strategic, shows self-awareness, expressive, acts with sensitivity, and sees patterns and interrelationships (Table III). This concept profile formed the starting point for the second phase of the research, wherein the profile content was presented to a further set of panelists.

Phase 2: results of the Delphi panels

Delphi round 1. Panelists indicated that decisiveness and integrity are two very different concepts. Therefore, in the second round, the two aspects were separated to clarify their relevance. First, the concept domain was relabeled “decisive” and the item describing aspects of integrity was moved to the concept domain “acts with sensitivity” as comment from the panelists indicated that this would be a more suitable position. Within this concept domain the item “knows own personal boundaries” was rejected (CVR = −0.33) and was removed from the profile. In the concept area “expressive,” the item “motivates with their use of language” (CVR = −0.04) was also modified to include a broader description of language including sound and visual imagery based on panelist feedback. By very slim margin, the domain title “shows self-awareness” (CVR = −0.08) was not supported by the panel, however within this concept domain the item “handles decisively and with integrity” was indeed a relevant component. All other aspects were accepted and remained unchanged for the next round. The result of this round was a profile containing five concept domains and 17 items (cf. Figure 2).
Delphi round 2. In the second round, the profile was offered to the same group of panelists as in round 1, resulting in 23 panelists completing the online survey. The panelists established that the concept domain title “acts with sensitivity” \((CVR = -0.05)\) did not describe the corresponding items correctly. After reviewing the comments and original FG data, this domain was labeled “empathic” as this term better described the concept area. Although accepted in round one, the item “has expertise within and outside own professional field” \((CVR = -0.39)\) was now rejected and subsequently removed. The revised five domain, 16 item profile was then offered for a third time to the panel (cf. Figure 2).

Delphi round 3. In the third round, 19 panelists \((n = 19)\) completed the survey online. In this round, only the concept domain title changes from round 2 were put forward for validation, as all items had been previously accepted by the panelists. All changes offered in this round were accepted and the final profile was established. Figure 2 provides a detailed overview of the CVR, acceptance or rejection of each item and concept domain, and actions taken by the research team throughout the three Delphi rounds.

**Final profile.** At the conclusion of the Delphi rounds, a final profile consisting of five domains and 16 items was established. This “SEEDS” profile clarifies that for a professional to be considered an “ECP,” he or she should display a set of characteristics which distinguishes him or her from peers. As Figure 3 illustrates, the profile highlights five domains of performance characteristics typical to ECPs, which are their ability to be strategic, empathic, expressive, decisive and to see patterns and interrelationships.

Each of the five concept domains contains descriptive items derived from data during both the FGs and Delphi panel rounds (DR) which describe characteristics and competences of each domain in more detail.

**Strategic.** According to the data, ECPs know how their added value could be best applied as advisor to an organization (FG1) and understand what both internally and externally to an organization is at play (FG3). When considering the correct communication approach, they “understand not only the consequences of their input, but the influence and the impact

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<tr>
<th>Domain/item</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Domain 1</strong></td>
<td>Shows self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Can reflect critically upon own actions and decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Knows own personal boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Asserts professional distinctiveness (dares to stand out)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Handles decisively and with integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Actively seeks opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Domain 2</strong></td>
<td>Acts with sensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Perceives situations from diverse professional and cultural perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Is aware of implications of own actions in relation to others</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Adapts behavior and language to the context</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Domain 3</strong></td>
<td>Expressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Motivates with their use of language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Can clearly articulate opinions and attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Communicates ideas with confidence and transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Domain 4</strong></td>
<td>Sees patterns and interrelationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Has expertise within and outside own professional field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Intentionally conscious of the changing world, and acts accordingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Quickly integrates emerging knowledge, trends and patterns to professional practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Can differentiate relevance of major and minor issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Domain 5</strong></td>
<td>Strategic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Purposefully focuses and reflects on their own professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Understands the complexity of (organizational) goals and context, and acts accordingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Has developed personal vision on the professional practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III. Concept competence profile

Identifying competence characteristics
of their solutions (FG1) strategically, tactically, operationally and from a societial perspective.” ECPs have the ability to think beyond prior decisions to “break free from usual models and standards to see where opportunities lie” (FG2). Characteristics to describe excellent performance in this domain offer that ECPs:

- purposefully focus and reflect on their own professional development;
- understand the complexity of (organizational) goals and context, and act accordingly; and
- have developed personal vision on the professional practice.

Empathic. Data indicated that ECPs have ability to be “exceedingly sensitive to the environment and organization” (FG1). They have a well-developed ability to listen, to deeply understand the culture and environment in which they operate (FG2). They have the ability to understand the perspectives of others (FG2), while making certain that “their own personal culture or views do not influence the situation” (FG2). They are able to tailor their communication dependent on the organizational or environmental level (FG2), and do not

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ROUND 1</th>
<th>ROUND 2</th>
<th>ROUND 3</th>
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<td>STRATEGIC</td>
<td>STRATEGIC</td>
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<td>purposefully focus and reflect on their own professional development</td>
<td>purposefully focus and reflects on their own professional development</td>
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<td>understands the complexity of (organizational) goals and context and acts accordingly</td>
<td>understands the complexity of (organizational) goals and context and acts accordingly</td>
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<td>has developed personal vision on the professional practice</td>
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<td>ACTS WITH SENSITIVITY</td>
<td>ACTS WITH SENSITIVITY</td>
<td>EMPATHIC</td>
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<td>perceives situations from diverse professional and cultural perspectives</td>
<td>perceives situations from diverse professional and cultural perspectives</td>
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<td>in terms of implications of own actions in relation to others</td>
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<td>adapts behavior and language to the context</td>
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<td>EXPRESSIVE</td>
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<tr>
<td>motivates with their use of language</td>
<td>motivates with their use of language</td>
<td>expresses self awareness</td>
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<td>communicates ideas with confidence and transparency</td>
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<td>can clearly articulate opinions and attitudes</td>
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<td>SHOWS SELF AWARENESS</td>
<td>DECISIVE</td>
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<tr>
<td>can reflect critically upon own actions and decision</td>
<td>can reflect critically upon own actions and decision</td>
<td>can reflect critically upon own actions and decision</td>
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<td>asserts professional distinctiveness (bravado to stand out)</td>
<td>asserts professional distinctiveness (bravado to stand out)</td>
<td>asserts professional distinctiveness (bravado to stand out)</td>
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<td>actively seeks opportunities</td>
<td>actively seeks opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>knows one’s personal boundaries</td>
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<td>knows one’s personal boundaries</td>
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<tr>
<td>handles decisively and with integrity</td>
<td>handles decisively and with integrity</td>
<td>handles decisively and with integrity</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEES PATTERNS AND INTERRELATIONSHIPS</td>
<td>SEES PATTERNS AND INTERRELATIONSHIPS</td>
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<td>intentionally conscious of the changing world and acts accordingly</td>
<td>intentionally conscious of the changing world and acts accordingly</td>
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<td>quickly integrates emerging knowledge, trends and patterns to professional practice</td>
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<td>can differentiate relevance of major and minor issues</td>
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<td>has expertise within and outside own professional field</td>
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Figure 2. Results at each stage of the Delphi panel rounds
place themselves centrally, but look for ways to connect and keep the “other” the principal focus (FG2). By being sensitive and empathic, ECPs are far more effective in the execution of their tasks (FG3). Delphi panel participants did not agree that the term “acts with sensitivity” properly encompassed these aspects. Consequently, the domain name was changed to “empathic” which was supported by the panel (DR3). Within this concept, ECPs exhibiting excellent performance:

- perceive situations from diverse professional and cultural perspectives, are aware of implications of their own actions in relation to others;
- adapt behavior and language to the context; and
- act with integrity.

Expressive. Data suggest that, compared to their average counterparts, ECPs are far more advanced in their abilities to argue, express, substantiate and persuade (FG1, FG2, FG3). An ECP is a “language powerhouse” (FG3), in the applicable native or foreign dialect, who can “play” with words, pictures and sounds because they have a deeper understanding of their meaning for the audience (FG1). One participant relayed an experience with an ECP, noting her abilities to “paraphrase and translate stakeholder comments in such a way that stakeholders would come to feel engaged with the objectives of the project” (FG2). ECPs must know how to use their voice, to know the manner in which they want to communicate message. Even when dealing with complicated material, ECPs can make the material “more human” (FG3), while remaining “suitable to the educational or intelligence level of the receiver” (FG3). Delphi panelists felt that the item “motivates with their use of language” should be described to include visual language and sound (DR2). Data highlights that ECPs:

- use language, images and sounds to activate and inspire;
- can clearly articulate opinions and attitudes; and
- communicate ideas with confidence and transparency.

Decisive. A substantial amount of commentary was given surrounding the aspects of professional identity and self-awareness. ECPs are seen as professionals who are focused and passionate about their craft. ECPs have “a defined understanding of what the profession entails, and what it means for them as an individual, and have made a conscious choice about
how to apply their own skills effectively” (FG2). Participants described an excellent performer as unique, authentic, or having a “special sauce” (FG1) which sets them apart, and “have courage and confidence” (FG1) enough to “know precisely how to demonstrate this individuality” (FG3). They are someone who “stands up for their opinions” (FG1) and “has the courage to bring them to the table” (FG1). Not only do they have strong cognitive abilities, but also possess “sound judgement”: they “know how to make decisions, know when to voice them” (FG1), and “react quickly and effectively.” (FG1). Panel participants affirm that these characteristics describe excellent performance, but felt that the domain title “shows self-awareness” was not suitable (RQ1), and therefore the domain was titled “Decisive” according to their comments. This concept domain explains that ECPs:

- can reflect critically upon their own actions and decisions;
- asserts their professional distinctiveness, dare to stand out; and
- actively seek opportunities.

Sees patterns and interrelationships. As indicated from a very high acceptance ratio by the panelists (DR1), curiosity and analytical abilities are key for an ECP, specifically in relation being able to deeply understand the context of the professional situation. Participants felt this had also to do with the ECP’s attitude: their perpetual desire to remain actively learning about their profession (FG3), being interesting in “how things are connected,” (FG1) and aware of what is happening in society (FG1), and then be “able to correlate these with what is happening within their own organization” (FG1). Not only are ECPs about to recognize these patterns and interrelationships, but they are able to consistently challenge their own ideas and assumptions (FG2). Panelists felt that expertise was not a requisite aspect (DR2). Excellent performance characteristics related to this domain describe that ECPs:

- are intentionally conscious of the changing world, and act accordingly;
- quickly integrate emerging knowledge, trends and patterns to professional practice; and
- can differentiate relevance of major and minor issues.

The five domains are symbiotic aspects which collectively form a description of what excellent performance in this profession entails. In other words, although an individual might stand out for exceptional strength in one area, an excellent professional should demonstrate strength in all five domains which typify excellent performance.

**Discussion**

Our research aimed to render a profile for excellent performance in the communication profession which could be used as a framework to support the development of training programs for high-potential communication students or professionals. The conceptual profile derived from the data provides an indication of the characteristics and professional behavior, which distinguish an ECP from an adequately performing professional. The conceptual profile should not be viewed as a set of end level program learning outcomes *per se*, rather a list of competences, which could be applied in a variety of professional contexts.

Current competence matrices for the communication profession infer that adequately performing professionals must have a solid grounding in their vocation. In other words, a professional demonstrates the acceptable level in the seven basic competence areas noted in literature, namely: theoretical aspects of the communication discipline, technical communication skills, organizational environment and processes, peripheral context, research and analytical ability, interpersonal aptitude, personality or character traits. But to be recognized as an “excellent” professional, additional characteristics should be demonstrated which supplement or
strengthen the basic competence profile. Professionals from the communication field in this study concur that these five competence domains and 16 items together form a profile of excellent performance indicators. These competence domains are not directly associated with specific technical knowledge or skill areas, but describe broader personal behaviors and capacities, specifically to think strategically, be expressive, empathic, and decisive, and to see patterns and interrelationships.

When the outcome of this research is compared with current general competence matrices, it could be argued that competences related to developing interdisciplinary, expressive, and strategic competences are to some extent described in the national and international competence matrices. However, the general competence matrices do not express the depth of complexity or understanding of context comparable to what is expected for excellent performance, nor do they describe a difference in level between standard and excellent performance levels. Interdisciplinary skill is often described as the ability to analyze and work within different contexts, disciplines, cultural settings. With regard to peripheral or contextual competence, the SEEDS profile stipulates more than just ability to see the patterns and interrelationships: an excellent performer can creatively act upon and synthesize contextual knowledge, which is not a focus of the profile for a general practitioner. With regard to expressiveness, some matrices describe the necessity for skills to present or publicize communication information or processes (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2016; Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016), but the ability to inspire through language or the degree of transparency is not mentioned in the basic level descriptions. Strategic abilities are described with relation to general organizational abilities (International Association of Business Communicators, 2016; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016) but lack the aspect of personal vision and the ability to act upon the complexity of their understanding on organizational and societal contexts as indicated for excellent performers.

The aspect of decisiveness seems underrepresented in the standard matrices. Decisiveness in the SEEDS profile refers to a professionals highly attuned ability to critically upon their own actions and decisions, asserts their professional distinctiveness, dare to stand out, and actively seek opportunities. When we look at the basic performance matrices, we do not notice these competences per se, however there are some aspects which could be similar. Critical reflection capability could be similar to the ability to be evaluative (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008). The closest reference to “daring to stand out” could be to the personal attributes of risk-taking or daring (Tench et al., 2013). The aspect of “actively seeing opportunities” seems similar to the criteria of being enterprising (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016; Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008). However, none of the profiles seem to include all of aspects of decisiveness as described by the SEEDS profile.

Empathy is indicated as a relevant competence for excellent performance not only by our research as having a “social and empathic antenna” is mentioned as one of the top three desired personal attributes for communication managers (Tench et al., 2013). Our findings support available literature that purports excellent performers are more skilled than average performers in empathy, societal and contextual awareness, and relationship management competencies (Bambacas and Patrickson, 2008; Boyatzis, 2008; Howard and Bray, 1988; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Westerhoudt, 2008). Our research explains that not only having empathy or displaying it is important, but also being aware of the implications of their own empathic responses and having integrity, which are not aspects made explicit in the studied matrices. Although empathy is a necessity for effective professional performance (Tench et al., 2013), CPs demonstrate weak empathic skills in practice (De Jong and Lentz, 2007; Lentz and De Jong, 2009). As organizations pay increasing attention to the impact of their messages in societal discourse, professionals must understand how the messages concerning their organizational goals impact society (Deetz, 2003). For example, a company extracting natural gas causing earthquakes which
damages thousands of homes should be highly attune to how information concerning their activities is received by the local community. Empathic competence, is therefore an integral aspect should ECPs intend to craft relevant, focused messages to balance both organizational and social interests.

Limitations
When interpreting these results, some limitations could be considered. With qualitative research, an amount of subjectivity is common, however the research team attempted to minimize this by approaching this using two different data collection methods and approaching two different participant groups. Furthermore, data were individually coded by four independent researchers and compared in several consensus meetings during data collection. The size and scope of the participant group could be an issue of question, however, the research team took care to select a broad range of professional voices, spread both geographically, by function and sector. In the final Delphi round, one fewer participant responded than our criteria specified. However, as the last round only sought approval for three changes in terms, the number of responses was considered adequate.

One might query the international or intercultural replicability of the profile. This study was conducted in the Netherlands and spanned a variety of roles within the communications profession. The profile could be applicable in countries where the role of the CP is similar to that in the Netherlands. However, there are differences in how the CP role is defined in different countries (Zerfass et al., 2012). In countries where the content and focus of the communication profession is different than in the Netherlands, there may be other competences which are more relevant for excellent performance. Similarly, as this study was conducted in the Netherlands, a culture wherein direct and open communication is valued (Hofstede, 2001), results may not be immediately applicable to a culture where indirect communication is the norm. Although more than 50 percent of participants involved in this study work in international contexts, and therefore it could be fair to assume their consideration of excellent performance extended beyond the cultural or national groups to which they belong, further research would be necessary to explore generalizability of the results in other cultural contexts.

After the final Delphi round, during which Dutch language versions of the concept and final profile were employed, an English language version of the profile was created by a native English speaker of the research team. Accuracy of the translation could be considered a limitation however this was verified by conducting a back translation into Dutch with a certified English/Dutch translator.

Practical implications
Although a specific training for ECPs is highly valued in the profession, there seems to be a discrepancy between what is taught and the organizational needs regarding management, business and communication qualifications (Tench et al., 2013), and many organizations still struggle with a definition for talent or excellence (Wooldridge, 2006). Recruiting (pre-) professionals who excel at not only understanding but responding to the complex business environment (Grunig, 1992) is an issue of more than strategy, but organizational survival (Combs et al., 2006; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Lawrence, 2015). Human resource departments can actively support their organizations by selecting the right mix of competences to support a communication employee’s professional development, especially for those who have the motivation to exceed general performance expectations. The practical relevance of this profile is twofold: for educators, it offers guidelines for assessment and curricular development, and for the work field, it describes competences which could be used for strategic selection and development of high potential candidates. Further research could explore the way in which these profile domains specifically influence
performance in practice, how this profile could be implemented in selection processes and development programs.

For university level education programs, the SEEDS profile can serve as an instrument to define learning outcomes and stimulate innovation in curricular development. Although they lack detailed competence frameworks which describe the SKAs of excellent performance, educational institutions often provide supplementary talent development or “honours” programs (Clark and Zubizarreta, 2008) which target the estimated top 5-10 percent of higher education students who work at a level that could be considered “potentially excellent” (Van Eijl et al., 2005). These programs exist at approximately 50 percent of US universities and colleges (Wolfensberger, 2012) and are increasingly prevalent at European higher education institutions (Wolfensberger, 2015). These programs endow students with additional competences beyond those offered in their regular curricula (Wolfensberger, 2015), and could therefore be designed to focus on specific excellence competences.

A conceptual profile describing excellent performance from a professional perspective provides educators with a set of characteristics to determine relevant competences, define learning outcomes and select appropriate assessment methods. This will help to ensure that educational goals are in line with work field expectations. For example, one approach that curriculum developers could consider to increase competence in the areas of “seeing patterns and interrelationships” and “empathy” could be the creation of more interdisciplinary projects and coursework. By creating opportunities to learn with students and faculty from other disciplines, students are likely to increase both their understanding of other’s perspectives, a key component in empathy development, and their exposure to modes of thought in other fields. As research indicates that the ethical behavior of students often decreases during business education programs, coursework in behavioral ethics could be a way to positively influence ethical decision-making capabilities sorely needed in practice (Drumwright et al., 2015). Such a program might then come close to what was recently conceptualized as the ideal communication curriculum for professionals of the future in which educators “help people learn when and how to be nimble – when and how to pay attention to the codes that call for a shift in attention, when and how to draw on uncommonly used communicative resources” (Dannels et al., 2014, p. 11).

Conclusion
Identifying and training CPs to excel is a shared goal of industry and higher education (Beechler and Woodward, 2009). Organizations and educational institutions agree that professionals must be trained to contend with the challenges of an unknown and complex future. For organizations, this is of critical importance, as they must do this within a rapidly changing media, economic, social and technological landscape. Using a two-phased approach, this research presents new findings for communication science, presented as the five domain SEEDS profile highlighting performance characteristics of ECPs. This research promotes a connection between the professional field’s expectations and training offered to prepare potentially excellent individuals for professional practice. Without evidence-based descriptive characteristics derived from professional practice, any training initiatives may risk falling short of work field expectations.

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Corresponding author
Melissa Fuller can be contacted at: m.m.fuller@utwente.nl

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The art of strategic improvisation
A professional concept for contemporary communication managers

Jesper Falkheimer
Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University, Helsingborg, Sweden, and
Katarina Gentzel Sandberg
Gullers Grupp AB, Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe strategic improvisation, a contemporary concept and approach based on the creative arts and organizational crisis theory, as a valuable approach for communication professionals. Strategic improvisation combines the need for planning and structure with creative action, and is a normative idea of how to work in an efficient way.

Design/methodology/approach – The concept is developed in a collaborative project between a major Swedish communications agency and a university scholar. The empirical foundation consists of 25 qualitative interviews with a strategic selection of successful communication professionals, identified as typical strategic improvisers.

Findings – An analysis of the interviews led to 11 defining patterns or themes typical for strategic improvisation and strategic improvisers. The interviews and the theoretical framework is the foundation of a communication model. Strategic improvisation is defined as a situational interpretation within a given framework. The model has three interconnected parts: a clear framework (composition), a professional interpretation (interpretation) and a situational adaptation based on given possibilities and conditions (improvisation).

Research limitations/implications – This is not a peer reviewed paper, but a paper in the section “In Practice,” directed toward communication professionals.

Originality/value – The ideas and model are connected to theories of improvisation, especially in music, which is rare in the field of communication management, and developed in a collaborative project between practice and research.

Keywords Best practice, Communication strategy, Communication management, Communication practitioner

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction
Communication is a core factor for all organizations, but over the years, the role of communication professionals has changed from transmitting information to facilitating sense and meaning making. This is arguably much more complicated, time-consuming and resource-demanding. As such, there is a great need for cooperation between research and practice to help communication practitioners meet a rapidly changing and increasingly complicated world. In this paper, we describe such a collaborative project between practice and academia in Sweden where the aim was to innovate and develop a contemporary concept and approach for communication practice. After listening to successful communication professionals and studying ideas and knowledge from the creative arts (especially music theory) and organizational crisis theory, we developed a model and concept named strategic improvisation. Strategic improvisation combines the need for planning and structure with creative action, and a normative idea of how to work in an efficient way.

The authors wish to thank Professor Peggy Simcic Brønn for constructive feedback and help with this paper.
Framework and driving forces

Most communication professionals have a relationship with and knowledge about communication models that describe what happens when we communicate. A model may work as a mindset that explicitly or implicitly effects how and why we communicate. Historically, the transmission model of communication based in linear and causal thinking with main concepts such as sender, media, receiver and feedback has dominated our thinking. This model and the concepts associated with it were established early in mass communication research, but over the years, the transmission model has been challenged and replaced with models that describe communication as a complex, active and interactive process. Instead of a sender and a receiver, concepts such as participant, interpretation and sense making entered the communication arena.

There are several reasons for this. First, research and professional experience have shown that the human communication process is not a technical issue, but is defined by space, time, context, power and the actors involved. Second, the development of media technology has made everyone a potential content producer, and the speed and volume of information has exploded. Researchers and professionals are grasping for new ways of thinking and managing this change through the use of new communication or management theories.

Social scientists have tried to describe and understand social change and transformation, concluding that we have entered a new formation of modernity – late modernity – that challenges causal, linear, rational and modernist thinking. Late modernity is characterized by the paradoxes humans live with. On the one hand, late modernity includes increased mobility, transnationalisation and more choices for individuals. On the other hand, late modernity leads to increased uncertainty, risk apprehension and new conflict formations. Communication in its fundamental sense, to create common meaning, is of core importance for actors (from organizations to individuals) in this fragmented structure.

The question is how communication professionals are going to meet the demands of and navigate in this new, speedy, uncertain, paradoxical and complex late modern context. This was the main question behind the collaborative project launched in 2017 by one of the major communication agencies in Sweden and a strategic communication scholar from Lund University. To answer the question, the team carried out two studies. First was a study of two fields of knowledge that matched the late modern challenges: the creative arts (especially music theory) and organizational crisis theory. The findings and ideas in these fields are beneficial for communication professionals since they focus on managing uncertainty and the need to act fast and find innovative solutions. Second, 25 communication professionals were strategically selected for interviews based on their success and an analysis of their ideas about strategic improvisation. We call these 25 professionals strategic improvisers.

The result of the two studies resulted in a new conceptual model that we call strategic improvisation, which is aimed at assisting the way professionals work with communication management. As a concept, strategic improvisation is not new. It has been used in different areas before, e.g. in management and crisis communication research. But it is new as a professional concept in communication management. The process of developing this model is explained below. We first summarize the results from the 25 interviews, and then introduce the model.

The interviews – defining patterns and themes

The 25 interviews allowed us to understand how strategic improvisation is practiced. We uncovered the silent knowledge of our strategic improvisers in their communication practice. They came from public and private sectors as well as NGOs. We also interviewed improvisers in the field of music, theater, politics and military strategy. Based on the interviews, we identified crucial and defining patterns that enable strategic improvisation.
From communicating to managing
Professional communication is impossible without a connection with an organization’s core purpose. Success is only possible when communication is focused on the important issues of core purpose, and when managers are given relevant guidance in decision making. To make an impact, communication management has to be integrated in decision-making processes.

From constancy to change
Improvisation requires an assumption that change is continuous, and is not seen as a threat or something awkward. When change occurs, new opportunities are opened. That idea you have been pondering is suddenly possible.

From wall flower to leader
Improvisers, or people who are able to make decisions without previous preparation, are people who act, who do not wait or necessarily ask for permission. Strategic improvisers can be described as rebels with a mission but always acting within the given framework (regulations, strategies, etc.). They define their mission and deliver on it with full force. Subsequently they get the mandate to act in the long run:

You have a role to fill. You cannot expect others to fill your role with content and then be disappointed that they do not understand what value you can add. It’s your job to fill the role.

From caution to courage
Our fears limit us, so improvisers try instead to counter their own experience to dare. They expose themselves to risks and practices in making independent decisions. The more experience you have as a professional, the easier. And of course, it is easier if you work in an organization that salutes initiatives from employees and trusts them. Organizations that allow mistakes are likely to have more successful strategic improvisers and innovations:

I usually remind myself that this is not brain surgery. There is no one dying!

From desktop to relationships and networks
Successful communication management is based on moving within and outside the organization and having the ability to convey signals from both. In addition, a network is needed that can quickly set up what’s needed. In order to succeed, strategic improvisers have many formal and informal contacts. Many spend a great deal of their workday far away from their own desktops:

I try to go for a walk around in the office an hour every day. I get 3-4 important conversations and capture many signals. I get a lot done that hour.

From sign-offs to taking charge
The key to gaining confidence is to deliver. In this case it is about proactive work, not just asking about how communication work is to be done, but also clearly contributing to the answers. Waiting for a sign-off may prove to be counter-productive. It may raise questions about why the communicator cannot determine where the risks are or make their own professional decisions. Does the communicator lack competence? Why does he or she not want to take responsibility?

To say “give me an assignment” is the worst way to get a mandate. Instead, ask the question of what is required in this context and propose it as your mission. That’s the way to get a confident position in the management team.
From lengthy regulating documents to short strategies

Long strategy documents rarely seem to have inspired strategic improvisation. But, nevertheless, a framework is needed. Just like in the world of music, some kind of an agreement or score is required. You cannot improvise without a framework. On the other hand, with a clear frame, it is easy to improvise freely. Based on frameworks and interpretations, short strategies are created, sometimes based on gut feeling:

We started by developing a clear concept. We have landed in a framework that give us a good foundation. We have all the arguments for all decisions.

I work in a politically-driven organization where you must constantly adjust to the strategic messages. I continuously do this so that every single event can be based on a stable bottom plate.

From nagging to explaining consequences

The ability to apply relational, internal and external perspectives in the decision-making process is a success factor. The person who can describe what the outside world wants, what the customers say or how the employees will respond creates maneuvering space in communication work and credibility in the organization:

Don’t nag about the necessity of good communications. Instead, deliver efficient communication and then describe what you did and why.

From lone wolf to teamwork

Make use of advisors who have another and even opposing opinion. Be aware of your own weaknesses and add on other expertise and facilitate them to play freely:

I feel a bit like a road worker paving the road and removing obstacles. Subsequently there will be space and opportunities for playfulness and creativity.

You know when you feel the flow. Everyone is pulling in one direction and are struggling hard to get there. And suddenly all obstacles are suddenly gone.

From duty to mission

The communication task is seen as a mission, and efforts are made to ensure that there is genuine willingness to work professionally with the communication in the business:

It’s a strange loyalty. You want the organization to appear as a professional. I’m mainly a tool.

From abundance to voluntary restraint

Simplicity is a word of honor in strategic improvisation. Improvisation artists in other disciplines often work with voluntary restraints. The simple and raw is usually the best. The fewer opportunities available, the more creativity will flourish. A small budget, lack of time or limited possibilities can therefore be the limitations that can help strategic improvisers. That is probably why improvisational ability becomes so crucial in crisis management. Strategic improvisation professionals also emphasize the importance of hanging on to their first idea and developing it with full force.

The model

Using earlier research, ideas from the creative arts (especially music), organizational crisis theory and the interviews, we developed a model that is meant to be an inspiration for communication professionals. Strategic improvisation is a situational interpretation within a given framework. The frame is structured, but improvisation is always done in the present and gives the opportunity to create something new in a concrete situation. It can only occur when three parts are combined: a clear framework (composition), a professional
interpretation (interpretation) and a situational adaptation based on given possibilities and conditions (improvisation) (Figure 1).

In the world of music, the composition is the piece of music to be performed: it may refer to the choice of tone, tempo and dynamics, length of composition or choice of instruments. In communication practice, the composition is the basic document that directs the work, e.g. the core purpose, business plan, organizational strategy and rules or regulations that apply to the organization.

The framework of the composition is the box within which you can safely move. In-depth knowledge and understanding of the organization’s logic, rules and strategies are necessary for successful strategic improvisation. The strategy serves as support and argument for the decisions taken, particularly when saying no to ideas and actions that are not in line with goals. Framework and control documents are often experienced as inhibitory. They take time to produce, are far too long and are obsolete the moment they are decided. But for many organizations, strategies are a clear support in the work. Properly designed, they can serve as a framework that creates scope for action and clear limits on what is possible to implement. Creativity and situational adaptation does not happen in a vacuum. The framework thus helps with the foundation of communication and makes the communicators feel safe in the improvisation.

Interpretation is the musician’s analysis of the composer’s intention. The musician asks questions about the choice of pace, phrase, dynamics and much more. What does the composer hope to convey with his/her composition? What feeling? Interpretation occurs when the individual makes the material his/her own. If all musicians interpreted the composition exactly the same, the result would be identical. But that does not happen. Professional communication works the same. Communication managers continuously interpret what the organization wants to achieve and what is required by communication activities to get there. Those who work with communication constantly have one leg outside the management room and have the competence to position the organization in relation to its outside world.

Improvisation involves reusing old materials and combining them with something new resulting in a new way of addressing a particular audience in a certain environment. Improvisation adds flexibility, innovation and adaptation to the situation. But, at the same time, it is not entirely random: there is a thought, a plan and a rhythm. Jazz musicians who
improvise usually start with a certain basic beat. It is this foundation that drives the music forward and which sets the framework for the improvisation.

Improvisation does not happen in a vacuum. But, in a free improvisation, the actual composition work takes place in the moment and then the musician becomes both an improviser and composer in the same person, in the unique moment. Improvisation is created in the present in another way than composed music based on a concrete situation with its specific conditions and possibilities. In both cases, the starting point is an impulse of some kind. When composing, there is the possibility of reflection and correction, but in an improvisation, everything must be done immediately. Improvisation works the same way in the world of communication. Framework and interpretation are in place, and an event within the organization or in the outside world makes it suddenly possible to act and communicate.

Improvisation also needs delimitations to be meaningful. Within music, delimitation involves a choice of musical material and musical form. Too many ideas, or all too quick changes between ideas, give an inconsistent and rather uninteresting overall picture. In strategic improvisation, the framework and interpretation work as these delimitations. Improvisation is not ad hoc and without goals. There is a clear direction in the impulses chosen and the opportunities that are utilized.

Strategic improvisation occurs when these three parts are combined: a clear framework (composition), a professional interpretation (interpretation) and a situational adaptation, based on given possibilities and conditions (improvisation). It is not about going outside the box, but about using the box you have. The three parts have to interact with each other. They are quality guarantees for each other.

Strategic improvisation is a creative concept that combines planning and strategy with improvisation, and allows communication professionals to adapt to reality within a predetermined structure.

The project about strategic improvisation was, as mentioned, conducted in collaboration between communication practice and research. It was and is a truly collaborative project, since neither practice nor research took the lead in developing the concept and ideas. It takes two to tango. The project ended up in a popular management book (Falkheimer and Gentzel Sandberg, 2017) in Sweden that has received a lot of attention, and the concept strategic improvisation has also been integrated in different ways in several organizations communication platforms.

Reference

Corresponding author
Jesper Falkheimer can be contacted at: jesper.falkheimer@isk.lu.se

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