

ETHICS AND SOCIETY

CHALLENGES IN ORGANISATIONAL & PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

EVANDRO OLIVEIRA
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[EDS]



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& ARTES



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**Technical
Specification**

Title

Ethics and Society: Challenges in Organisational
and Public Communication

Editors

Evandro Oliveira
Gisela Gonçalves

LabCom Books

www.labcom.ubi.pt

Collection

Communication Books

Direction

Gisela Gonçalves

Graphic Design

Diana Mota

ISBN

978-989-9229-22-8 (paper)

978-989-9229-21-1 (pdf)

Legal Deposit

542564/25

DOI

10.25768/9229-21-1

Print

Print-on-demand

Universidade da Beira Interior
Rua Marquês D'Ávila e Bolama
6201-001 Covilhã
Portugal
www.ubi.pt

Covilhã, 2024



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ETHICS AND SOCIETY: CHALLENGES IN ORGANISATIONAL AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

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On 29 October 2024, the province of Valencia was struck by a catastrophic DANA (Depresión Aislada en Niveles Altos), unleashing unprecedented rainfall that led to severe flash floods. In the municipality of Chiva, precipitation levels reached approximately 500 millimetres within a period of eight hours, which is equivalent to the typical annual precipitation for the region. The deluge transformed streets into torrents, swept away vehicles, and inundated homes and businesses, resulting in at least 222 fatalities and leaving numerous individuals missing.

As the disaster unfolded, residents were confronted with a plethora of inconsistent and delayed information from the authorities. The State Meteorological Agency (AEMET) issued an orange weather warning at 6:42 a.m., which was subsequently upgraded to a red warning less than an hour later. However, the gravity of the situation was not effectively conveyed to the public. At 13:00, Valencian President Carlos Mazón held a press conference in which he asserted that the storm would subside by 18:00. This prediction proved to be disastrously inaccurate, as conditions continued to worsen throughout the day.

Furthermore, the Generalitat Valenciana did not issue an ES-alert warning via mobile phones, advising citizens to remain indoors until 8:11 p.m., which occurred several hours after the most intense flooding had begun. This delay resulted in many residents being unaware of the imminent dangers, which led to preventable casualties and hindered rescue operations.

In contrast, local organisations and community groups assumed the role of communicators, filling the communication void. Local community groups employed social media platforms to disseminate real-time updates on safe evacuation routes, shelter locations and areas to avoid due to severe flooding. These community-driven efforts provided crucial information that was otherwise lacking from official channels, thereby underscoring the vital importance of timely and accurate communication during emergencies.

The DANA prompted a substantial public response concerning the management of communication. Over the course of time, thousands of individuals engaged in public demonstrations, calling for the resignation of President Mazón and other officials, citing their perceived mismanagement of the crisis. The protesters highlighted the delayed warnings and inconsistent information as factors that contributed to the exacerbation of the disaster's impact, resulting in unnecessary loss of life and property.

This tragedy serves to illustrate the vital importance of ethical communication in crisis situations. The provision of timely, transparent, and accurate information is not merely a procedural necessity; it is also a moral imperative that can significantly influence the outcomes of such events. The 2024 DANA in Valencia serves as a poignant reminder that effective communication can save lives, while failures in this regard can lead to devastating consequences.

In the contemporary era of unprecedented global interconnectivity, the ethical dimensions of communication have assumed heightened importance for organisations and public institutions. The function of communication has expanded beyond its traditional role as a mere conduit for conveying messages. It has become a strategic instrument that influences perceptions,

shapes behaviours and builds relationships between entities and their stakeholders. This evolution reflects broader societal shifts, including technological advancements, global crises, and intensified public scrutiny, which have positioned communication as a central aspect of organisational and institutional operations. Those with a stake in an organisation or institution are becoming more demanding of transparency, accountability and authenticity, as a result of their greater access to information and ability to mobilise through digital platforms. It is thus imperative that communication practices align with societal values, with ethical commitments embedded not only in messaging but also in actions.

Similarly, public institutions are subject to comparable pressures, which pertain to their role in representing collective interests and fostering trust among citizens. The dissemination of critical information during crises and the engagement of the public in policy-making demonstrate the necessity of ethical communication in order to maintain legitimacy and ensure the effective functioning of democratic systems. The ethical communication of information in these contexts serves not only the function of conveying information, but also that of reinforcing democratic principles and addressing the complex needs of diverse publics.

The field of organisational communication is distinguished by a particularly complex ethical terrain. The advent of social media and artificial intelligence has transformed the manner in which organisations engage with stakeholders, introducing a number of challenges, including those related to data privacy, the circulation of misinformation, and the potential for algorithmic bias. These technologies present unparalleled prospects for engagement, yet it is imperative that meticulous ethical deliberation is undertaken to avert potential harm and maintain stakeholder confidence. Moreover, organisations are increasingly being held to account for their social and environmental impacts. While corporate social responsibility initiatives are of vital importance in addressing societal challenges, they risk being perceived as disingenuous or symbolic if not accompanied by authentic and transparent communication practices. Such perceptions have the

potential to erode trust and undermine the effectiveness of these efforts, underscoring the necessity for ethical consistency between organisational actions and messages.

The field of public communication is shaped by a distinctive set of ethical challenges, largely due to the inherent obligation to serve a diverse range of societal interests that frequently present conflicting priorities. In particular, public institutions operating within democratic frameworks must achieve a delicate equilibrium between inclusivity, transparency, and accountability, while simultaneously navigating the intricate network of political, cultural, and economic pressures that surround them. The advent of the digital age has intensified these challenges, necessitating that public institutions manage the accelerated dissemination of information, contend with the proliferation of misinformation, and address the polarisation of public discourse. It is of the utmost importance that ethical communication practices are employed in order to mitigate the aforementioned issues, foster trust and facilitate constructive dialogue. By prioritising honesty, accessibility, and responsiveness, public communicators can ensure that their actions align with the values of a democratic society and contribute to the strengthening of social cohesion.

Ethical communication is not merely a moral obligation; it is also a strategic necessity. Organisations and institutions that integrate ethical principles into their communication practices are better equipped to navigate contemporary challenges, cultivate trust, and maintain credibility. The implementation of ethical strategies has been demonstrated to enhance stakeholder loyalty, reinforce organisational resilience, and contribute to societal well-being. The realisation of these outcomes is contingent upon the implementation of comprehensive ethical frameworks to inform decision-making processes. Such frameworks must address the ethical implications of emerging challenges, including those posed by artificial intelligence, the complexities of globalisation, and the demands of an increasingly informed and sceptical public. Furthermore, ethical communication must be firmly embedded within the organisational culture, influencing policies, practices and interactions at all levels.

This book represents a significant contribution to the field, addressing the pressing need to examine and address the ethical and strategic dimensions of organisational and public communication in an era characterised by global interconnectivity, technological advancements, and shifting societal expectations. The book is based on foundational theories and enhanced by empirical studies, providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities encountered by communicators in navigating this complex terrain.

The chapters collectively constitute an invaluable contribution to academic discourse, comprising double-blind peer-reviewed papers presented at the ECREA OSC Interim Conference held in Lisbon, Portugal from 5 to 7 July 2023. The conference, entitled “The Normative Imperative: “Socio-Political Challenges of Strategic and Organisational Communication” provided a platform for critical, empirical, and theoretical discourse on the evolving role of communication in shaping social dynamics and meeting ethical imperatives. Subsequently, the chapters were subjected to a rigorous editorial process, during which they were reviewed in detail by the editors. This allowed for the integration of a variety of novel methodologies and approaches.

The book is structured around a series of chapters that address the ethical and strategic dimensions of communication from a variety of theoretical and practical perspectives. It synthesizes theoretical frameworks and empirical studies, offering a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of contemporary communication challenges.

“The Normative Imperative: Ethics,” authored by Shannon Bowen of the University of South Carolina, is the opening chapter of this collective book, a text based on her keynote address at the Interim Conference on Organizational and Strategic Communication in Lisbon. Bowen emphasizes the significance of normative theory in ethical decision-making, particularly within strategic communication, utilizing normative scholarly analyses. She advocates for a Kantian deontological issues management framework that employs the categorical imperative to guide moral actions. The chapter

introduces a refined ethical issues management model that incorporates moral deliberation throughout the decision-making process. By adopting these principles, the author argues that organisations can improve ethical decision-making, enhance relational outcomes, and foster public trust, thereby contributing to organizational effectiveness, professionalism, and advanced scholarly inquiry.

The third chapter, “Adapting to the Challenges of Communication in the Digital Age: PR Ethics in Germany,” is authored by Elke Kronewald, affiliated with Fachhochschule Kiel and serving as President of the German Council for Public Relations. This chapter explores the ethical challenges faced by public relations (PR) professionals in a digital environment shaped by social media and artificial intelligence. Kronewald emphasizes the role of the German Council for Public Relations in setting ethical standards through instruments like the 2012 German Communications Code. By presenting three case studies, the chapter illustrates the consequences of ethical missteps and advocates for embedding ethical training into PR education to address the complexities of modern communication.

In chapter four, Gisela Gonçalves (Universidade da Beira Interior, Labcom) proposes a return to the “basics” of PR ethics to discuss “ethical issues in contemporary PR practice”. Her core argument revolves around the tension between two normative perspectives: advocacy (promoting a client’s interests) and dialogue (seeking mutual understanding). The author uses a range of theoretical perspectives, including Habermas’s ethics of discussion, Grunig’s theory of excellence, and various viewpoints on responsible advocacy, to analyse the complexities of ethical public relations practice in an increasingly digital world. In line with the previous chapter, the author also concludes with recommendations for enhanced ethics education in public relations curricula to meet the evolving challenges posed by digital technologies and artificial intelligence.

In the fifth chapter, titled “Habermas’s Communicative Action and the Constructivist-Relational Theory as References for the Communication of

Sustainability in Organizations,” Lauralice Ribeiro (University of Coimbra) and Paula Ribeiro (CECS and Instituto Politécnico de Portalegre) examine the challenges of sustainability communication within organizations. They draw upon theoretical frameworks such as Jürgen Habermas’s Theory of Communicative Action and Stanley Deetz’s Politically Attentive Relational Constructionism (PARC). The authors highlight ethical practices and audience inclusion as central principles, promoting collaborative dialogue as a strategy to address the goals of the UN 2030 Agenda. Their analysis underscores the importance of participatory practices to enhance organizational sustainability efforts.

The sixth chapter, written by Paolo Brescia, Lucia D’Ambrosi, and Valentina Martino from Sapienza University of Rome, is titled “University Fourth Mission and Social Impact: Ethical Imperative and Relational Challenges in the Context of Higher Education in Italy.” This chapter examines how Italian universities are embracing the “Fourth Mission” to expand their societal impact. Through a comparative analysis of European trends, the authors reveal a transformation from traditional education models to governance frameworks that prioritize shared value creation and community engagement. The chapter portrays universities as dynamic institutions integrating conventional learning with digital innovation to achieve meaningful societal outcomes.

The seventh chapter, “Decoding the CSR Communication Paradox: Strategies for Effective Engagement,” is authored by Bárbara Costa (Polytechnic University of Coimbra) and Alexandra Leandro (CEOS.PP, CECS - University of Minho, and Polytechnic University of Coimbra). This chapter addresses the paradox in corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication, where efforts to build transparency and trust often face public skepticism. Employing a mixed methodology, including literature reviews and surveys, the authors propose strategies to bridge the gap between organizational intentions and stakeholder expectations. They emphasize transparency and stakeholder engagement as essential components for fostering trust and addressing societal challenges effectively.

“Social Participation in Public Organisations: A Case Study of Santa Catarina’s Prosecutor Office (MPSC)” is the focus of the eighth chapter, written by Gisiela Klein (University of Coimbra) and Clerilei Aparecida Bier (Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina, Brazil). This chapter investigates the communication practices of the Public Prosecutor’s Office of Santa Catarina (MPSC) in Brazil. Through an analysis of 453 social media posts, the authors identify a predominant focus on informational content, with limited efforts to engage citizens actively in decision-making processes. They advocate for a shift toward participatory communication strategies that involve citizens more directly in governance.

The ninth chapter, “Public Sector Communication and Gender Perspectives: Italian Local Social Media Practices,” is authored by Marica Spalletta (Link Campus University), Gea Ducci (University of Urbino), Lucia D’Ambrosi (Sapienza University of Rome), and Camilla Folena (University of Urbino). This chapter explores the use of gender-sensitive communication practices in Italian public administrations, particularly on social media. Despite the potential of such practices to foster inclusivity, the authors find that implementation is hindered by bureaucratic resistance and political dynamics. They highlight the progress made in left-leaning regions and call for empowering professionals to advance gender inclusivity in public communication.

The tenth chapter, “The Sustainability Narrative Challenge: The Secil Group,” is authored by Andréia Melchiades Soares (ISCSP – Universidade de Lisboa). This chapter examines the sustainability communication efforts of Secil, a Portuguese cement company, using framing theory and content analysis. The analysis reveals a gap between Secil’s intended sustainability narrative and its media portrayal as a polluting entity. Despite Secil’s efforts to frame itself as sustainable, the chapter highlights the need for a holistic approach that integrates environmental, social, and governance (ESG) dimensions to avoid fragmented messaging and perceptions of greenwashing.

‘This is me’ – says the agency. A multi-method case study on the projected organisational identity of Banco de Portugal” is the eleventh chapter,

written by Éva Kaponya (ICNOVA, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa). This chapter investigates how public agencies, subject to compulsory disclosure, build strong reputations and socio-political legitimacy through self-presentation. The study uses discourse and computer-assisted content analysis of Banco de Portugal's website to assess its projected identity. Key findings reveal the Bank's emphasis on its institutional type (national supervisory authority and central bank), its dual mission (price and financial stability), and its strong European integration. The study highlights the importance of transparency and accountability in public agencies. The ethical dimension lies in ensuring that transparency is not merely a superficial compliance with regulations but a genuine effort to inform and engage stakeholders truthfully.

The twelve and final chapter, titled "Governmental Public Relations Strategies: The Saudi Public Communication in Social Media during the Pandemic Crisis," is co-authored by Mutaz Alotaibi (King Abdulaziz University & Cardiff University) and Susan Kinnear (Cardiff University). This chapter investigates the strategic use of social media by Saudi governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. By analyzing platforms like Twitter/X, the authors identify effective practices for disseminating information and engaging the public. They highlight the role of social media as a critical tool for crisis communication while identifying gaps in existing research on its impact and effectiveness.

As society progresses, communicators are required to address a multitude of complex challenges that transcend technological, societal, and political boundaries. This book serves both as a foundation and a guide, offering tools for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to navigate the ethical imperatives of communication in an interconnected world.

By engaging with the themes and case studies presented here, readers will be equipped to engage in critical evaluation of communication practices, adopt ethical frameworks, and contribute to the development of a more accountable and sustainable future. Communication is not merely a

responsibility; it is a transformative force with the capacity to shape societal progress. This book encourages its readers to recognise the potential of communication to foster dialogue, humanism, symmetry, trust, inclusivity, and resilience in today's globalised society, and to redefine the role of communication in this regard¹.

1. Authors are granted the liberty to use their preferred spelling and regional variations of English, including both British and American conventions, as well as diverse orthographic styles where appropriate.

THE NORMATIVE IMPERATIVE: ETHICS¹

Shannon A. Bowen

/University of South Carolina, United States of America

Normative Theory

The normative imperative is an idea whose time has come. As Oliveria and Gonçalves pointed out in the Introduction, we live in turbulent times that invite contention and misinformation, so we must investigate the authenticity of issues and claims. Our desire for honesty is an imperative as academics, and a normative demand of ethical discourse. As I asked the audience at our conference, “If we don’t lead the charge for normative behavior, who will?”

Those in business are concerned with the conduct of their enterprise; those in regulatory and legal affairs with placing regulations constraining poor behavior; those in theology are concerned with faith and devotion. Who is concerned with the normative imperatives of truth, dignity and respect, authenticity, rights, good intentions, and moral duty? As academics within the larger domain of strategic communication, we understand the organization’s role both in creating social mores and in maintaining ethical relationships with stakeholders and publics of all types. Professionals in organizations or regulatory environments are concerned with a small functional area of a larger organization (i.e., sales, legal,

1. This paper is based on the keynote presented at the interim Organizational and Strategic Communication thematic session conference that took place from 5th to 7th of July 2023 at the Autonomous University of Lisbon, in a joint organisation with LabCom – Research centre, from the University of Beira Interior.

logistics, etc.) rather than macro-level concerns of ethics, relationships, reputation, and credibility.

In systems theory terms (Luhmann, 1984), we are the only management core function that also acts as a boundary spanner throughout the organization, internally and externally, so that we know they myriad of values and perspectives surrounding the organization (Stoffels, 1994). We want the participation of every organizational function in normative decision making, but the research offered by the strategic communication function often gives insight into the perspectives of others that is more far-reaching and inclusive than other disciplines. Therefore, scholars in strategic communication must lead the charge for a normative imperative of reasoned perspectives and ethical behavior.

Normative Ethics

Although the responsibility for organizational ethics falls to us in a communicative context, normative theory plays a crucial role in various fields, including philosophy, management, public relations, labor, finance, technology, and decision-making, by providing a framework for evaluating actions, behaviors, and policies based on established norms and principles. A normative approach guides ethical decision-making by offering principles and standards to help individuals and organizations determine the right course of action and the best approach for problem solving.

An imperative is an essential consideration that obligates all rational persons (Paton, 1967). Why is a normative approach so essential that it is called an *imperative*? Normative theory establishes standards and ideals that define acceptable behavior and serve as benchmarks for evaluating actions and policies. It promotes consistency, moral autonomy, and objectivity in decision-making, enhancing professionalism by embedding ethical standards into professional practices (Bowen, 2004b). One can argue that the role of the academy in society is to engage in normative theorizing and postulation to challenge our respective fields into advancements.

Scholars must study and advance our theoretical approach to the strategic and organizational communication to push our understanding of the field forward and to help master the rapidly changing and complex environments of modernity. Normative theory informs policy and practice by providing a moral foundation for decision-making and fostering an ethical culture within organizations. It encourages accountability and critical reflection on moral issues, helping individuals and organizations navigate complex ethical dilemmas and make decisions that align with their values and principles.

Normative theory is applied in ethical decision-making by providing a structured framework that guides individuals and organizations in evaluating and choosing actions based on established ethical principles and standards. This process in organizations identifies issues that are potential problems, normatively as they emerge, and can thus allow the widest range of strategic options, research time, and policy options for their management (Bowen et al., 2024).

Ethical Issues Management

Ethics in issues management is crucial for maintaining organizational integrity and public trust. Issues management as the highest-level problem solving function in an organization is at its best when early issue identification occurs. When issues are identified early, an organization has the most strategic options and can take a proactive strategic approach, or an interactive one, rather than accommodative or reactive stances (Chase, 1984; Jones & Chase, 1979).

Scholarship (Bowen, 2000, 2004a) has been undertaken that applies ethics to the issues management process, adapting the traditional process (Buchholz et al., 1994) for a normative approach. Bowen's (2000), "A Theory of Ethical Issues Management: Contributions of Kantian Deontology to Public Relations' Ethics and Decision Making" explored the role of ethics in issues management within public relations, proposing a normative theory grounded in Kantian deontology. This theory aimed to enhance the ethical

decision-making processes in public relations, contributing to organizational effectiveness and professionalism. The refined, normative ethical issues management process involves:

- 1. Establishing Ethical Principles:** Defining ethical principles from various theories such as deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics that should serve to guide.
- 2. Identifying Ethical Dilemmas and Issues:** Recognizing situations where the right course of action is not clear.
- 3. Research:** Formal and informal methods of gathering relevant opinion and policy information; collecting all necessary facts, understanding stakeholders, and potential consequences; creating a priority list of issues
- 4. Evaluating Options Using Ethical Principles:** Assessing actions based on moral duties (deontology), outcomes (utilitarianism), and virtues (virtue ethics);
- 5. Considering Stakeholders:** Analyzing the potential impact on all affected parties.
- 6. Making a Strategic Decision:** Choosing the action that best aligns with ethical standards and helps to resolve the issue.
- 7. Communicating the Decision:** Transparently explaining the rationale and ethical considerations behind the decision.
- 8. Evaluation and reflection on the Decision:** Reviewing outcomes and the decision-making process to improve future practices.

Adding ethics to the issues management process means to incorporate moral deliberation throughout the process and revisit these analyses as more research and information become available. This approach helps practitioners navigate issues, resolve problems, have effective internal communication, engage in crisis management, and use stakeholder

communication by ensuring actions are truthful, authentic, candid, use contextual full disclosure, incorporate research, and maximize moral responsibility (Bowen, 2016).

Deontology: Normative Ethics of Kant

Kantian deontology is centered on the concept of duty and the moral law (Paton, 1967). It posits that actions are morally right if they are performed out of duty and adhere to universal moral principles. The categorical imperative, a key component of Kantian ethics, requires individuals to act according to maxims that can be universally applied across contexts of time, space, culture, and constraints that may obstruct the analyses (Guyer, 2004).

Autonomy is a fundamental principle in Kantian ethics, allowing individuals to make decisions based on reason rather than external influences. Rationality is essential for ethical decision-making, ensuring that actions are guided by moral principles rather than subjective preferences (Sullivan, 1994). Autonomy is crucial for ethical decision-making, allowing strategic communicators to act based on reason and moral duty. A moral legislator makes normative decisions based on objective rationality, being uninfluenced by self interest and other concerns that would bias the decision making (Sullivan, 1989). Moral autonomy must rely upon the rational analysis of numerous perspectives, basing judgment on merit of the moral principle involved.

Deontology is a highly normative moral philosophy that is also present in real-world application and practice (De George, 2010). Adding an element of normative theory into professional practice as well as scholarly research strengthens both. To understand how to incorporate a deontological perspective, it is essential to review Kant's categorical imperative. Again, the term *imperative* offers an essential component of assessment that *categorically* obligates all rational decision makers.

The Categorical Imperative as Normative Tests

The categorical imperative, formulated by Immanuel Kant (1785/1964), is a central concept in his moral philosophy and deontological ethics. Kant valued rationality but moved beyond empiricism to ask questions such as ‘what *can* we know?’ and redefine the role of metaphysics in modern philosophy (Fieser, 1999). Thus, Kant’s categorical imperative does not rely on education, titles, or formal training in philosophy.

The categorical imperative obligates all rational beings to consider their moral duty by virtue of their rational agency. It offers a way to universalize a moral test while valuing equality of rationality and the moral worth of doing one’s moral duty to uphold the right choice. The three formulas provide a way to evaluate the morality of actions based on universal principles through these tests, which must all be answered affirmatively in order for a decision to be ethical:

Universalizability Test:

- **Principle:** Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.
- **Application:** Before taking an action, consider if the guiding principle (maxim) of your action could be applied universally. If everyone acted in the same way as you are about to, would it lead to a coherent and acceptable world? If the action cannot be universalized without contradiction, it is morally impermissible.

Humanity as an End Test:

- **Principle:** Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end (of value in themselves), and never merely as a means to your ends.
- **Application:** Ensure that your actions respect the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals. Exploitation, selfishness, and usury are ruled out. Do

not use people merely as tools to achieve your own or organizational goals. Instead, recognize and honor their moral autonomy and intrinsic value.

Kingdom of Ends Test:

- **Principle:** Act according to maxims that accord with a universal kingdom of ends where all actions have moral worth based on good will alone.
- **Application:** Imagine a society where everyone acts according to moral laws they have legislated for themselves. Your actions should be consistent with the laws of this ideal moral community, where each person is both a legislator and a subject of the laws, always acting with good intent.

By applying these tests, individuals can determine whether their actions are morally acceptable according to Kantian ethics, emphasizing consistency, respect for others, beneficence, and the creation of a just moral order (Baron & Fahmy, 2009; Baron, 1995). In passing all three tests of the categorical imperative, Kant offers a way to ensure that decisions have moral worth; that is, they are equally applicable to all, maintain human dignity, and are based on good will alone (Guyer, 1992)

As an ongoing process, symmetrical communication (Grunig & Grunig, 1992) is essential for ethical issues management, fostering mutual understanding and trust between organizations and their stakeholders. Symmetrical communication is an ongoing dialogue as a give and take process supported by the normative Theory of Excellence (Grunig, 1992). The excellence theory is normative in that it answered the question, “How can public relations/communication contribute maximally to organizational effectiveness?” In the literature and theory supporting the empirical research principles of excellence were offered, of which ethics and integrity were the final component (Bowen, 2004a; Verčič et al., 1996).

Rather than constituting a discreet “step” in the normative ethical issues management process, symmetrical communication is ongoing, comprised of research (formal and informal, primary and secondary), discussion, listening, negotiation, conflict resolution, and seeking to understand the

viewpoints and worldviews of stakeholders and publics. Stronger, more enduring, and more ethical decisions can result from efforts to include varied perspectives in issues management strategy (Bowen & Heath, 2020). In this manner, the ethical duty of maintaining dignity and respect for all involved can be maintained by the communication function.

Ethical decision-making contributes to the professionalization of public relations by promoting autonomy and adherence to moral principles (Neill et al., 2024). Public relations practitioners should serve as the ethical conscience of their organizations, guiding decision-making processes based on ethical considerations (Bowen, 2008).

Conclusion

The paper emphasized the important role of the scholar in studying normative theory, particularly the normative application of ethics in the discipline to create ideal and maximal solutions to complex moral problems. It underscores the importance of ethics in issues management for strategic communication, as the primary problem-solving function of an organization. This refined version of issues management offers a more complete ethical exposition than every postulated before, completing a moral duty of communicators to act as normative theorists and professional communicators as consciences of their organizations. By adopting a Kantian deontological framework, organizations can enhance their ethical decision-making processes, contributing to organizational effectiveness, improved relational outcomes, and increased public trust.

The proposed issues management model offers a normative ethical theory as well as a practical tool for strategic communicators to navigate ethical dilemmas and make decisions that uphold their moral duty. A deontological framework would use the three tests of the categorical imperative as an ongoing analysis tool, applying these moral analysis standards often as new research, information, and perspectives emerge on each issue under study. By propelling scholarship into the normative imperative of bettering our

understanding of ethics, it is hoped that ethics in the complex and turbulent world of problems we can confront with issues management will be based on strong ethical theory and application. Addressing the normative imperative is perhaps the most important, lasting, and valuable challenge strategic communication faces in the turbulent modern era.

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ADAPTING TO THE CHALLENGES OF COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE: ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR PR PRACTICE IN GERMANY

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The relevance of practice-oriented PR ethics

People with communication responsibilities demonstrate a pronounced awareness of moral issues (Link & Zerfass, 2023, pp.234-235). In their day-to-day work, PR professionals are repeatedly confronted with ethically questionable situations (e.g. Zerfass, 2020, p. 67). Even prior to the pervasive integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into modern communication, technological innovations such as social bots or big data meant that more than half of the German communication specialists surveyed at the beginning of 2020 had encountered at least one ethically sensitive situation in their professional lives in the previous year (55.5 per cent; Zerfass et al., 2020, p. 20). After the advent of AI, more than two-thirds of the 200 PR and communications professionals from German companies surveyed at the end of 2023 stated that “dealing with ethical issues has become a much larger part of their professional role in the last year “ (69 per cent; Mynewsdesk, 2024, p. 28)¹.

Information: This chapter, including its sections and paragraphs, contains structures, passages, elements and thoughts from essays that have already been written or published in German (Kronewald, 2023, 2025a, 2025b). Artificial intelligence was used for.

paraphrasing, summarising and translating (ChatGPT, DeepL).

1. Original quote in German: „der Umgang mit ethischen Fragen im letzten Jahr einen deutlich größeren Teil ihrer beruflichen Rolle eingenommen hat“.

Obviously, incorporating AI into PR activities raises additional ethical dilemmas (Zerfass et al., 2023, p. 48; Deutsche Telekom, 2022, p. 10). This is hardly surprising, because innovations that permeate both our everyday lives and our working environment regularly confront those involved with profound ethical and moral considerations (Deutscher Ethikrat, 2023, e.g. pp. 78-79). It is evident that these issues cannot be resolved by legislative changes alone, which are often retrospective in nature.

It appears that there is the need for a set of ethical principles and standards that PR professionals can adhere to in their daily practice, as is the case in other professional disciplines (e.g. medicine, law). “PR ethics is part of communication ethics and an ethics of public communication. It is concerned with the moral and ethical behaviour of PR practitioners and addresses questions about the justification, origin, appropriateness and systematics of the norms of behaviour of PR actors” (Bentele & Rademacher, 2022).²

The following section provides an overview of the voluntary self-regulatory system of the PR industry in Germany before focusing on the most important ethical codes and guidelines (section 3). Section 4 presents the work of the Council and includes three case studies. Section 5 concludes by underscoring the significance of PR ethics in the evolving landscape of digital communication.

The German Council for Public Relations

For over a century, standards of conduct have been developed within the public relations sector and are set out in (inter)national codes and guidelines (e.g. Code d’Athènes and Code de Lisbonne), as provided by various associations. In Germany, the German Council for Public Relations (Deutscher Rat für Public Relations, DRPR) was established in 1987 as an instrument of voluntary self-regulation by PR professionals. Driven by the responsibility to

2. Original quote in German: „Die PR-Ethik ist Teil der Kommunikationsethik und einer Ethik der öffentlichen Kommunikation. Sie beschäftigt sich mit dem moralisch-sittlichen Handeln von PR-Praktikerinnen und -Praktikern und behandelt Fragen nach der Begründung, Entstehung, Angemessenheit und nach der Systematik von Handlungsnormen des Handelns von PR-AkteurInnen.“

provide accurate and transparent information to the public, PR practitioners have committed themselves to ethical standards and professional conduct (DRPR, n.d. a).

The members of the supporting organisation (Trägerverein) and the Council are drawn from three professional associations: the German Public Relations Association (Deutsche Public Relations Gesellschaft, DPRG), the Association of Public Relations Agencies (Gesellschaft Public Relations Agenturen, GPRA) and the Federal Association of Communicators (Bundesverband der Kommunikatoren, BdKom).

The Council's remit encompasses all PR activities in Germany, irrespective of professional status or membership of professional associations. It is responsible for the development and updating of codes and guidelines, as well as the monitoring and reporting of possible violations. Understanding and complying with established codes and guidelines is considered as an essential part of the professional competence and conduct of communications professionals in their daily work. It is therefore crucial that these principles are integrated into training and professional development (e.g. DRPR, 2012, p. 5).

Codes and guidelines

The Code d'Athènes (1965) and the Code de Lisbonne (1978) constituted the foundation for the formulation of codes and guidelines within the German public relations industry. The German Communication Code was introduced in 2012 as an expansion and amendment to the early regulations. It sets out fundamental ethical principles and standards of conduct for PR practice in Germany. In particular, the Code emphasises the importance of transparency, integrity, fairness, truthfulness, loyalty and professionalism and provides a detailed definition of these values.

The German Communication Code

The concept of transparency is contingent upon the availability of clear and unambiguous information about the originators of communication or messages. In the event of a conflict of interest, integrity requires that competing

or conflicting mandates be accepted only after consultation with the clients, and that simultaneous action on the same matter in the roles of PR professional, journalist or politician be avoided. Fairness includes respecting the autonomy, independence and freedom of the media and refraining from any form of discrimination, bribery or other undue influence. According to the Council, “PR and communications professionals are committed to truthfulness, not knowingly spreading false or misleading information or unverified rumours” (DRPR, 2012, p. 4). The cornerstone of genuine professionalism is loyalty to the client and the profession, as well as the demonstration of integrity.

Guidelines

The objective of the guidelines supplementing the Communication Code is to address specific or emerging phenomena in the communications industry. Examples include guidelines on the relationship between public relations and journalism, relationship management in the political environment, the issue of covert advertising, and the specificities of online and scientific PR (table 1).

Table 1. Overview of Council’s guidelines (DRPR, 2023; Kronewald, 2023; Kronewald, 2025a)

Guideline	Content
PR and journalism	Dealing with PR assignments, press gifts, invitations/press workshops/press trips
Handling of guarantees	No guarantees of success, guaranteed quality only for PR instruments, not for media response
Covert advertising	Criteria for covert advertising, special forms of covert advertising, differentiation of PR from covert advertising
Maintaining contacts in the political arena	Transparency requirement, professionalism, political communication in online media, framework provisions
Ad hoc publicity	The imperative, - to limit oneself to the relevant information - to observe the novelty value - transparency - to avoid misleading information

Media co-operations	Principles of co-operation with publishers: respect for editorial freedom, unauthorised tie-ins
PR in digital media and networks	Limits of social bots, guidelines for influencers, joint responsibility of client and agency, transparency of senders - in online media work, - for comments, - for mobilisation platforms - for sponsorship, product mailings and satellite sites
Science PR	Ethical requirements: Factual fidelity, comprehensibility, relevance filter for society, appropriate storytelling, increased transparency requirements, preprints, communication of uncertainties, respectful interaction and constructive collaboration The roles of scientists and communicators: responsibility at management level, advisory and steering function, public appearances
Public participation and communication	Transparency and commitment, accessibility and representativeness
AI in PR	Transparency/labelling, truthfulness, responsibility of clients and agencies/service providers

The necessity for the creation or adaptation of guidelines arises from the recognition that certain current practices within the PR industry may be ethically questionable, but cannot be sanctioned under current codes and guidelines. In particular, the Corona pandemic has brought science PR increasingly into the focus of the Council: the special situation has made it necessary to develop new guidelines for the handling of (preliminary) scientific results (e.g. preprints) and their communication to the public.

The AI guideline

The advent of ChatGPT towards the end of 2022 has prompted a growing discourse within the communications industry about artificial intelligence. In addition to practical applications, ethical considerations are at the heart of the ongoing debate (see section 1). In response to this, the Council presented a draft AI guideline to the communications industry in September 2023. Feedback and comments were then incorporated into the final version of a specific guideline on AI in November 2023 to provide guidance for communicators. It aims to ensure that AI is handled carefully but in a practical and

constructive manner. Due to the complexity and uniqueness of AI, extensive explanations were needed in the introduction to this guideline to raise awareness when dealing with AI tools (e.g. data protection, risk of bias and discrimination). The guideline places particular emphasis on the principles of transparency and truthfulness (DRPR, 2023).

Under the current provisions of the guideline, any AI-generated content that has not been subjected to a human verification process must be labelled as such. To illustrate, if a manager delivers a speech that is automatically translated in real time by an AI system, this translation must be labelled as AI-assisted. Nevertheless, if AI is employed for preparatory purposes, such as drafting press releases or social media posts, and the content is subsequently reviewed by a human, then labelling is not mandatory unless the content is published without further review (DRPR, 2023, pp. 2-3). However, communicators are always free to label any use of AI and thus be even more transparent than the AI guideline recommends (Kronewald, cited in Schuster, 2024, pp. 23-24). Furthermore, all AI-generated images must be labelled even if they have been subsequently edited by humans.

The labelling should be designed in a way that allows people without specialist knowledge to recognise that the content is AI-generated, in order to avoid any deception. This is particularly important as PR content is often further processed by others, e.g. in a journalistic context or on social media platforms, who in turn apply their own ethical standards (DRPR, 2023, pp. 2-3).

The guideline also highlights that the dissemination of false information, fake news and deep fakes by professional communicators for manipulative purposes as well as the creation of artificial relevance through AI-driven interactions is unacceptable (DRPR, 2023, p. 3).

Given the rapid developments in the use of AI, the Council will continuously review and adapt its position on the use of AI in the light of current discussions and existing and future regulations (e.g. from the European Union or the Ethics Council). Given the global nature of the communications industry

and given the fact that other PR organisations have also established rules for AI (e.g. International Public Relations Association, IPRA, Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management; see the overview in Kronewald 2025b), consistent regulation across national borders would be beneficial (DRPR, 2023, p. 3).

Complaints procedure and Council decisions

Any member of the public can lodge a complaint with the Council if they suspect that PR professionals have breached established codes or guidelines. It does not matter whether the alleged offences have been committed by members of the relevant professional bodies. The chairmen and members of the Council will first consider whether the complaint lies within its area of responsibility and whether it appears to be admissible. Only when the majority of council members perceive both to be true, a detailed investigation will be carried out by the members of the relevant Complaints Committee, either in the area of policy or in the area of business and markets.

During the process, an official response will also be sought from the organisation complained about. In the context of this response, the person or organisation concerned may acknowledge their misconduct (for example, by informing the affected public or stakeholder) and also declare that they will refrain from doing so in the future (self-commitment).

Once the investigation is complete, the committee presents a draft decision to the full Board for discussion and a vote. The case may be closed or dismissed if it is subsequently found to be inadmissible or unfounded, or if the self-commitment appears to be credible. Warnings are issued for negligent or minor misconduct, reprimands for deliberate and serious misconduct. These warnings or reprimands are reasoned expressions of the Council's opinion and should not be confused with court judgments. The Council's decision will be made public, first to the person(s) concerned and then to the media (for details, see the complaints procedure, DRPR, 2015).

The following three cases illustrate the nature of the Council's advisory opinions.

Case 1: Lack of transparency and truthfulness

The Council has formally reprimanded the activist group known as 'The Yes Men' for serious breaches of basic ethical standards in their communications.³ The group aims to draw the media's attention to social injustices by creating and disseminating fictitious messages and repeatedly contravene the principles of sender identification and truthfulness.

Context

On 16 January 2023, a fake press release was distributed to journalists and bloggers via the internet domain addidas-group.eu. The release linked to a deceptive website that falsely represented itself as an official Adidas website. The press release made the false assertion that Adidas had appointed an union leader from Cambodia as Co-CEO. Additionally, the company's new direction was highlighted by the innovative 'Reality Wear' collection, which was presented at a fashion show during Berlin Fashion Week. Later that day, the false report was clarified by various media organisations after an Adidas representative denied it. 'The Yes Men' then issued another press release to clarify the nature of the hoax.

A few months later, toy manufacturer Mattel was the target of a comparable disinformation campaign. In another press release, the activists falsely claimed to be Mattel and announced the company's intention become entirely free of plastic by 2030 and launching a new product 'EcoWarrior Barbie'. A fabricated quote from Mattel CEO Ynon Kreiz was used. The news was disseminated by a number of international media outlets, but the misinformation was rectified up by the afternoon of the same day, resulting in the retraction of the story by the news portals.

3. This section contains an AI-supported English translation and partly paraphrasing of the Council's Decision (DRPR, 2024 a, January 24) and the associated press release (DRPR, 2024 b, January 24).

Decision

The German Council for Public Relations has issued a reprimand against the activist group ‘The Yes Men’ due to the repeated lack of sender transparency and breaches of truthfulness in communication. These breaches are in contravention of the German Communication Code and the guideline on public relations in digital media and networks.

Explanation

The Council considered that the incidents described constituted deliberate deception. In the cases under discussion, the individuals known as ‘The Yes Men’ had specific agendas in mind with their doppelganger actions. The initial action aimed to support the #PayYourWorkers campaign in the media and motivate the Adidas company to sign a satisfactory work contract. In the case of Mattel, the increased media presence of the Barbie film was strategically used to simulate a fictitious pledge by the company to manufacture plastic-free toys by 2030.

In the cases under investigation, the actions of the activist group deliberately led both the public and media representatives to erroneously assume that the communication originated directly from the companies concerned. The use of fictitious email accounts, websites and press releases served to reinforce this deception and therefore constitutes the deliberate dissemination of false information.

Despite the misrepresentations being uncovered during the course of the day by journalistic investigations and later clarified by the activist group itself, there are still serious violations of essential communication standards. This includes in particular the importance of labelling the origin of a communication, transparency and truthfulness.

In the Council’s view, these incidents did not entail a so-called mystery phase, a practice occasionally used in online communication when launching new

products. In this tactic, the originator of the communication is deliberately left unclear or anonymous with the aim of generating short-term attention.

In contrast, ‘The Yes Men’ deliberately gave the impression that their communication actions originated from the respective companies, which explicitly leads to the dissemination of false information. While the intentions behind such actions may be laudable, the deliberate dissemination of fake news contributes to the erosion of the credibility of news reporting and further confuses the public.

Media coverage

The Council’s decision was disseminated by German PR industry media outlets (e.g. PR Journal, PR Report), ensuring that communicators were apprised of the latest developments (Dillmann, 2024, January 24; PR Report, 2024, January 30).

Case 2: Avoidance of public dialogue on social media

The Council has issued a warning to the microblogging service Twitter (now: X) and the biotechnology company BioNTech SE for violating the transparency requirements of the German Communication Code.⁴ This was due to BioNTech SE’s endeavour to circumvent a public discourse on Twitter in the context of ‘vaccine patents’ in 2020.

Context

The Council had received a complaint regarding the communication behaviour of BioNTech SE and Twitter. The complaint alleges that BioNTech SE is evading the public debate on vaccine patents. The available evidence suggested that BioNTech SE attempted to render its Twitter account invisible for a period of two days. This was done in order to prevent comments and further interactions on the account during the timespan of an announced online campaign against vaccine manufacturers. The Director of External Communications at BioNTech SE justified the move by referring to an

4. This section contains an AI-supported English translation and paraphrasing of the Council’s Decision (DRPR, 2023, July 7) and the associated press release (2023, August 2).

online campaign that the German Federal Office for Information Security (Bundesamt für Sicherheit in der Informationstechnik, BSI) had provided information about, which could result in a deluge of comments, a takeover of Twitter accounts, and the proliferation of fictitious accounts.

The BioNTech director's request was sent directly to Twitter's 'Head of Public Policy, Government and Philanthropy' in Berlin, who then contacted Twitter's content moderation team on 13 December 2020 with a request to monitor the hashtags #JoinCTAP and #peoplesvaccine. Furthermore, the Twitter accounts of BioNTech SE, Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca should be monitored, with reference to a BSI warning about potential cybersecurity risks associated with 'People's Vaccine Day' on 14 December 2020.

According to the Council's assessment, the Council's investigation clearly confirmed the facts of the case, although the precise implementation of the measures could not be uncovered. Neither the German Federal Office for Information Security nor Twitter responded to written enquiries and therefore did not make any statement on the case that could help clarify the matter. BioNTech SE transferred a detailed statement, justifying the temporary deactivation of the Twitter account with security concerns and part of cybersecurity strategy.

Decision

The Council issued a warning against Twitter and BioNTech SE for contravening the transparency requirements set out in the German Communication Code.

Explanation

The Council has interpreted BioNTech SE's request to Twitter, specifically addressed to its lobbyist, as an attempt by the company to evade critical public discussion in connection with vaccine patents. This interpretation is based on the fact that the request was made in order to temporarily hide BioNTech's Twitter account. The lobbyist's request cited potential cybersecurity risks that could result in an elevated probability of account takeovers and misinformation as part of an online campaign, allegedly based on

warnings from the German Federal Office for Information Security. In the absence of a formal statement from this Office, the rationale behind the issuance of such a warning remains opaque.

The request gave rise to controversy on Twitter, particularly regarding the intensified monitoring of certain accounts and hashtags associated with People's Vaccine Day and related activist campaigns. Despite the review conducted by Twitter's 'safety team', which determined that no violation of the Terms of Service has occurred, the account activity related to the campaign was closely monitored during the relevant period and, in some cases, identified as misleading content.

While the specific implementation of these measures couldn't be clearly demonstrated, the Council concluded that the interactions between BioNTech and Twitter violated the principle of transparency. Moreover, both Twitter and the German Federal Office for Information Security refused to provide any clarification regarding the allegation. The Council perceived the actions of BioNTech SE as a calculated strategy to actively impede public discourse at specific times, particularly in the context of 'People's Vaccine Day'. In an official warning, the Council expressed concern about the potential adverse impact of this behaviour on public communication and the free formation of opinion. It thus called for such practices to be discontinued in the future.

Media coverage

The industry media also reported on the Council's decision in this case (e.g. PR Report, 2023, August 9, KOM, 2023, August 3, PR Journal: Dillmann, 2023, August 2). Given the prominent role of BioNTech during the coronavirus crisis and ongoing discussions about Twitter, a multitude of general or specialized news outlets with a wide reach (e.g. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Heise) picked up the Council's decision and rationale (Hanfeld, 2023, August 3, Krempl, 2023, August 4). An online news service with a focus on the pharmaceutical industry published an article that included a quote from BioNTech. In the report, entitled "BioNTech and Twitter warned by PR body for trying to duck COVID-19 vaccine debate", BioNTech was cited as follows:

“(…) BioNTech said that “cyber security-related aspects” led to its decision in 2020 to deactivate the company’s own Twitter account for a period of two days, noting that each user can deactivate their own account independently for up to 30 days. “The decision was made in an exceptional situation, also with regards to cyber security, nevertheless, we understand that this decision can be interpreted differently in retrospect from an external perspective,” the pharma said” (Taylor, 2023, August 10).

Case 3: Misleading use of AI-generated content

The Council reprimanded a district association of the German party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD Göppingen) for deliberately deceiving the public through the misleading and unlabelled use of artificial intelligence in its social media communication.⁵

Context

The Council suspected that various posts on Instagram and Facebook used the names and photos of people who appeared to support the AfD, but who probably did not exist, and whose portrait photos were AI-generated but not labelled accordingly. This behaviour was uncovered in the course of journalistic research and reporting (Rottach, 2024, March 21, Huesmann, 2024, April 2). This would violate the principles of truthfulness, transparency and clear labelling (as stated in the German Communication Code and the guideline on the use of AI in PR).

In the course of the review, the Council offered the parties involved the opportunity to explain the facts of the case from their perspective in accordance with its complaints procedure. Despite several requests for comment on the matter, AfD Göppingen let the deadlines pass and did not respond.

5. This section contains an AI-supported English translation and paraphrasing of the Council’s Decision (DRPR, 2024, August 20) and the associated press release (2024, August 21).

Decision

The Council issued a reprimand to AfD Göppingen for breaches of truthfulness in communication and a lack of transparency and labelling regarding the use of AI.

Explanation

In the opinion of the Council, this was a deliberate deception of the public by AfD Göppingen in order to manipulate the opinion of voters or to influence it in their favour.

At least two posts on Instagram and Facebook of AfD Göppingen used AI-generated photos showing presumably non-existent persons. These fictitious people stated that they had become members of the AfD and explained their motivation for joining the party. According to investigations by various journalistic regional media that first raised this suspicion (Rottach, 2024, March 21, Huesmann, 2024, April 2), a trained eye could see that something was wrong with the images. But neither the images themselves nor the posts contained any indication that they were AI-generated. The Council's investigations confirmed this assumption.

In the Council's view, both AI-generated posts on Facebook and Instagram were clear breaches of the principles of truthfulness, transparency and clear labelling, set out in the German Communication Code and the AI guideline.

As stated in the according press release, the Council is extremely critical of this form of non-transparent and manipulative communication. The Council called on all those engaged in the field of political communication to refrain from portraying fictitious AI-generated personas and to handle AI-generated content responsibly and transparently: "Truthful and transparent communication by political parties is essential for opinion-forming and public trust in democratic processes. Therefore, AI-generated content,

especially in the visual area, should be used by parties with caution and labelled transparently [...]” (DRPR, 2024, August 21).⁶

Media coverage

In addition to well-known industry media (e.g. Horizont: Adam, 2024, August 21, PR Journal: Dillmann, 2024, August 22, PR Report 2024, August 21), the press release and the underlying Council’s decision were also picked up by media in Stuttgart (e.g. Stuttgarter Zeitung). These media outlets have a regional connection to the criticized AfD district association, thus an increased interest in the reprimand. They therefore enriched their reporting with additional information (e.g. on the legal framework for public communication or reactions in social media; Müller, 2024, August 22, Müller, 2024, September 3/4). Due to structural media links, there were also reports in the media of neighbouring Austria.

Implications and outlook

The three examples presented illustrate the manner in which novel technologies and platforms, such as social media and AI, pose novel ethical challenges for PR professionals in the course of their daily work. It is incumbent upon to professional bodies to provide guidance in this area. In Germany, such associations have established their own voluntary self-regulatory body, the German Council for Public Relations. The aim of the Council is to provide guidance in the form of codes and guidelines with the aim to minimise the risk of (un)knowingly breaching these rules. “An important part of the DRPR’s self-image is its role in sanctioning communicative misconduct directed at the public. The DRPR relies on preventive measures such as the creation of codes of conduct and the public condemnation of misconduct through reprimands and warnings” (DRPR, n.d. b).⁷

6. Original quote in German: „Wahrheitsgetreue und transparente Kommunikation von Parteien ist für die Meinungsbildung sowie das Vertrauen der Öffentlichkeit in demokratische Prozesse essenziell. Daher sollten KI-generierte Inhalte, insbesondere im visuellen Bereich, von Parteien mit Bedacht eingesetzt und [...] transparent gekennzeichnet werden.“

7. Original quote in German: „Ein wichtiger Bestandteil des Selbstverständnisses des DRPR ist seine Aufgabe, kommunikatives Fehlverhalten gegenüber der Öffentlichkeit zu ahnden. Dabei setzt der DRPR auf präventive Maßnahmen wie die Erstellung von Verhaltensrichtlinien sowie auf die öffentliche Verurteilung von Fehlverhalten durch Rügen und Mahnungen.“

The Council operates in a pre-judicial sphere; warnings or reprimands are a reasoned expression of opinion, not a court judgement. To be effective, the Council relies on media visibility and awareness. However, the level of interest from the general media (beyond the trade media) is often dependent on news factors such as celebrity status and geographical proximity. It is therefore important that the work of the Council, its codes and guidelines are integrated into the teaching, education and training of current and future communicators.

The advent of AI in the communications industry has demonstrated that ethical concerns remain a significant and pressing issue. As a result, an institution whose codes and guidelines can provide guidance on how to navigate ethically challenging situations in everyday communication is more relevant than ever.

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ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

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In April 2024, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management approved the Guiding Principles for Ethical and Responsible Artificial Intelligence. According to this international professional association, the key principles of ethical public relations practice with AI are: human oversight and governance, which ensures that professionals act in the public interest while mitigating issues such as plagiarism, misinformation, and bias; taking responsibility for the AI-generated content produced, which requires thorough research and critical thinking to maintain trust; transparency about the role of AI in content creation, which calls for clear disclosure and proper attribution for AI-generated materials. The use of AI in public relations and communications practice is now at the forefront of discussions professional and academic circles. However, accountability, transparency or trust are not new issues in the ethical public relations debate, as they have long been guiding principles of the public relations profession.

The practice of public relations is driven by the goal of legitimizing the actions of organizations in the public sphere through persuasive communication strategies. Therefore, the limits and pitfalls of this persuasion process are the cornerstone of the debate on the ethics of public relations, with or without artificial intelligence. In this chapter, we return to the “basics” of public

relations ethics by discussing the two normative visions that best capture this old and ever-present debate: public relations as advocacy and as dialogue. Based on this reflection, we will then discuss their practical applicability in light of the current challenges facing strategic communication professionals in a highly digitalized and networked “platformized society” (Van Dijck et al, 2018).

Responsible persuasion

If we assume that the main objective of public relations practice is to persuade and influence people, the extent to which this persuasion can be ethical is a relevant question. There are many possible answers to the “ethics of professional persuasion” (Messina, 2007), but the debate has mainly oscillated between two normative perspectives: advocacy and dialogue.

Advocacy is one of the key functions of public relations. Advocacy is “the act of publicly representing an individual, organization or idea with the object of persuading the targeted audiences to look favorably on - or accept the point of view of - the individual, organization or idea” (Edgett, 2002: 1). The basic premise of advocacy is linked to the principal professional duty: to promote the interests of clients in arenas that are inherently competitive. The goals of advocacy are therefore as pragmatic as they are self-interested. Public relations practitioners aim to “create and maintain a favorable image for their organization or client” (Barney & Black, 1994: 234). If the pursuit of this goal conflicts with the common interest, they are likely to choose to put the interests of the client or employer first.

From this perspective, the practice of public relations is akin to that of a lawyer fighting for his client in the “court of public opinion”, a phrase coined by Ivy L. Lee, one of the pioneers of modern public relations (Cif. Hiebert, 1966: 185). But just as a lawyer does not always question the righteousness of his client’s actions in order to represent him within the confines of the law, so the Public Relations practitioner must not question his client’s motives for promoting his interests in the public arena.

Unlike journalists, public relations professionals have no obligation to present neutral, objective or balanced information to the public. The media itself can be used to achieve their objectives. It is therefore normal for ethical issues to arise in the practice of public relations, relating to truth, transparency, impartiality, choice of words or images, or even allegations of spin or manipulation of public opinion. There are professional codes of conduct that bring together a set of values and guiding principles that are widely used both nationally and internationally. However, as in any profession, these codes are unlikely to guarantee good practice, which always depends on moral agency (Santos & Gonçalves, 2017).

Some authors take an optimistic view of public relations practice as advocacy. This is the case of Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001), who propose a “professional responsibility theory of public relations ethics”. In other words, they seek to combine the seemingly contradictory roles of public relations as advocate and as a “corporate conscience” (Bowen, 2008). These authors argue that the practice of public relations must be accompanied by a sense of social responsibility, in addition to promoting the interests of its clients. Edward L. Bernays, probably the first public relations theorist, was saying the same thing in 1980: “public relations is the practice of public responsibility” (cf. Grunig, 2014: 16).

Reber, Cropp and Cameron (2001) follow the same line of thought, arguing that persuasion professionals should consider the mutual benefits of their public relations strategies, in the lives of their clients, but also in society at large. For example, a company that resorts to *greenwashing* strategies - communicating a false environmental positioning - may be compromising its own public interest. In this case, if the professional chooses to disseminate incomplete or even false information, he or she will be helping to promote products that are bad for the environment, despite increasing the client’s brand awareness and sales.

More critical authors argue that it is unrealistic to position public relations as an “ethical guardian”, a mediator between private and public interests,

when its practice is propagandistic and therefore intrinsically bad and even potentially anti-democratic (L'Etang, 2003, 2006; Moloney, 2006). There are too many power asymmetries in access to communication tools and control of the media agenda, they stress, to believe in the benevolence of public relations work for any collective interest. At the heart of this criticism are two assumptions. On the one hand, it is pragmatically difficult to understand the existence of a collective public with an identifiable universal interest, as they are different publics with different interests at different times (Hove, 2013). On the other hand, even if it were easy to identify what the public interest is, it should be determined by collective democratic processes, not by an individual moral agent such as a public relations professional (Parkinsson, 2001).

Aware of the negative connotations, professional public relations associations have fought to promote an ethic of responsible advocacy through the creation and adoption of codes of conduct. The pioneering Athens Code, also known as the International Code of Ethics for Public Relations, was adopted in 1965 by the Centre Européen de Relations Publiques (CERP). This Code begins by recognizing the power and responsibility of the profession: “Considering that the use of the evolving techniques enabling them to come simultaneously into contact with millions of people gives Public Relations practitioners a power that has to be restrained by the observance of a strict moral code”.¹ The Code then highlights three core values in the conduct of PR practitioners (*italics added*), as stressed by Gonçalves (2013):

- Refrain from “subordinating the *truth* to other requirements” (point 11) and from “circulating information which is not based on established and ascertainable facts” (point 12).
- To be in charge of encouraging “the moral, psychological and intellectual conditions for *dialogue* in its true sense, and to recognize the rights of these parties involved to state their case and express their views (point 7);

1. The full Athens Code can be found at: https://www.ipra.org/static/media/uploads/pdfs/ipra_code_of_atheens.pdf

- “Act in all circumstances, in such a manner as to take account of the respective interests of the parties *involved*; both the interests of the organization which the practitioner serves and the interests of the *publics concerned*” (point 8).

The symmetrical ideal of dialogue

A central perspective in the discussion of the ethics of public relations is linked to the “Excellence Theory” proposed by James Grunig (1992, 2002) and his team. The main premise of the “Excellence Theory” is that the communication promoted by public relations has value for organizations because it helps to build positive long-term relationships with strategic publics. To this end, the practice of public relations does not have persuasion as its ultimate goal, but rather mutual understanding:

We believe public relations should be practiced to serve the public interest, to develop mutual understanding between organisations and their publics, and to contribute to informed debate about issues in society (Grunig, 1992: 9).

The reasoning behind this assertion can be deconstructed as follows. When an organization ignores or opposes the interests of the public, the public organizes itself into pressure groups or activists who will confront and challenge the organization. The result is a conflict that contributes to creating imbalances in society. On the other hand, if an organization seeks to achieve its objectives while respecting the interests of its publics, it will do so responsibly (socially, environmentally, at work, *etc.*), and contribute to social harmony.

For Grunig, mutual understanding can be attained by practicing the “bidirectional symmetrical model of public relations” because it is “inherently ethical” (Grunig & Grunig 1996: 40). The term bidirectional refers to the directionality of communication, asserting that public relations should actively promote dialogue between two or more parties, specifically between the organization and its publics. The term symmetrical addresses

the power dynamics inherent in communication processes, emphasizing that participants in the dialogue must acknowledge each other's equal rights in the act of discourse. This perspective appears to be influenced by Habermas's "ethics of discussion", who is considered one of the most significant contributors to research in the field of public relations (Buhmann, Ihlen, & Aaen-Stockdale, 2019).

The great innovation of the "ethics of discussion", compared to Kantian deontology, lies in its dialogical conception of reason, which is influenced by the linguistic turn in analytical philosophy, specifically the theory of "speech acts". Whereas in Kant the determination of the universal ethical principle (categorical imperative) and its foundation arise from the solitary reflection of a "monological reason", for Habermas, ethical inquiry is associated with a "communicational reason" that materializes in discussions open to the plurality of members of an ideal community of argumentation. If such discussion is purely rational – meaning they occur without domination – they are likely to yield *consensual* solution to the problems at hand.

In Habermas's "Theory of Communicative Action", the conditions under which the justification of consensus can occur are characterized by equitable opportunities for participants to adopt dialogic positions during various types of speech acts. These conditions define the "ideal speech situation", a space (the public sphere) in which speakers and listeners engage in communication. Applying this idea to the practice of public relations, Ron Pearson (1989) theorized about the possibility of thinking of an "ideal public relations situation" in the public sphere, where the organization (the speaker) and the publics (the listeners) interact. More specifically, he suggests that the "ideal public relations situation" is a precondition for the practice of ethical public relations, which enables mutual understanding between the organization and its publics and minimizes imbalances between the two (Pearson, 1989: 241). Thus, just as in the "ideal speech situation", which is characterized by dialogue and the collective agreement of the participants on a set of rules that govern that same dialogue, the "ideal public relations situation" would also be a precondition for all speech acts, thereby enhancing dialogue between the organization and its publics.

The primary distinction between the ethics of advocacy and the ethics of dialogue in the context of public relations lies in the pursuit of consensus through dialogue. In advocacy practice, public relations professionals engage in self-interested argumentation, aligning their strategies with the positioning and objectives of the client or employer—such as profit, visibility, or other forms of power—without considering the perspectives of other actors. Given that this positioning may or may not correspond to the truth, the initial discussion is fundamentally biased, rendering it a non-ethical discourse. Conversely, in the practice of dialogue between an organization and its publics, public relations can theoretically facilitate less favorable consensus; however, if these are founded on valid arguments, they can be deemed ethical, as they acknowledge and respect the interests of both parties involved.

Despite its well-intentioned premise, the defense of an ethic of dialogue as the foundation for the practice of the symmetrical two-way model of public relations presents several sensitive issues, as Hove (2013, p. 143) aptly observes. First, it imposes overly stringent constraints on what can be categorized as persuasion and influence, deeming common one-way public relations techniques unethical from the outset solely because they serve private interests or strategic objectives. Furthermore, it assumes that dialogue is invariably a symmetrical and ethically preferable mode of communication, when, in many contexts, simple one-way dissemination of information may be the most appropriate approach. Second, it recognizes the pursuit of mutual understanding and consensus with audiences as the ultimate goal of organizational communication. Finally, it places excessive emphasis on the responsibility to respect, or at the very least avoid infringing upon, the autonomy of interlocutors. However, as with the ethics of responsible advocacy, practitioners may still face challenges in determining the most effective means of serving the public interest.

Benson (2008) proposed a vision of compromise that integrates the advocacy of private interests with dialogue, as promoted by the symmetrical communication model, emphasizing transparency and communicational

authenticity. He argues that it is unrealistic to expect the profession to renounce the self-interested motivations of advocacy. On the contrary, as Hove (2013) rightly emphasizes, Benson recommends that instead of public relations pretending to serve some notion of the common good, they should embrace transparency and authenticity in their practices, explicitly acknowledging the private interests that underpin their strategies and narratives. This perspective is further illustrated in the following excerpt:

Many people may be ready to accept that virtually any presentation of information represents a particular social interest; they just want to know what that interest is, so that they can try to make up their own minds whether such a particular interest might also partake in the general interest (Benson, 2008, 21).

In essence, by prioritizing communicational transparency, Benson underscores a commitment to the common good while acknowledging that the practical objectives of public relations are not inherently dishonest.

Practical challenges

Digital technologies offer many opportunities for strategic communications (Freberg, 2017), for example, by using sponsored content (Zerfass et al., 2019), social media influencers (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Davies & Hobbs, 2020), social bots (Wiesenberg & Tench, 2020), and big data analytics (Wiesenberg et al., 2017). A recent survey of approximately 2,300 public relations professionals across various European countries indicates that they perceive a greater number of moral challenges in their daily work compared to previous years (Hagelstein, Einwiller, & Zerfass, 2021). Not surprisingly, these challenges are mainly related to communication practices in a digital environment. Based on that study, the following lines present examples of these practices, illustrating the difficult balance between the advocacy of private interests and symmetrical or dialogical communication, guided by the values of transparency and authenticity.

Sponsored content

The use of sponsored content on social networks and in media outlets—formatted to closely resemble journalistic material—has become a common practice. This hybrid format blends editorial and advertising content, making it challenging to discern the authorship of the message and, consequently, its underlying objectives. Such content aims to imitate journalistic formats to deliver advertising messages that appear to embody the independence and rigor typically associated with journalism. When the distinction between journalism and advertising becomes obscure, the value of transparency is called into question.

Digital influencers

A recent investigation of the European Commission and national consumer protection authorities of 22 Member States, Norway and Iceland based on a screening (“sweep”) of social media posts from influencers highlight that 97% published posts with commercial content, but only 20% systematically disclosed this as advertising². If the sponsors/brands of the content produced are not always identified, the question of communication transparency arises once again. Even in cases where brand sponsorship is clear, the authenticity of the message and consequent interactions with followers can be doubted. While influencers can facilitate direct engagement with audiences, the potential for manipulation and the prioritization of commercial interests over genuine connections raises ethical concerns. In fact, the strategic rationale behind the use of digital influencers in brand communication clearly departs from any ideal of symmetrical or dialogic public relations practice.

Social Bots

Social bots are computer programs designed to simulate human identity, enabling communication that mimics that of individuals browsing the web. Within social networks, it can be exceedingly difficult to recognize when one is engaging with automated forms of communication driven by algorithms rather than by human users. Consequently, interactions between

2. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_708

humans and computers may be perceived as a simulacrum of reality, often serving manipulative purposes to varying extents. For instance, a chatbot may be employed primarily to address simple and innocuous inquiries related to products or services. However, there also exist social bots intentionally programmed to disseminate false information, often with opaque or even anti-democratic objectives. Take the recent case of the US elections. Studies have shown that the X chat bot using AI spread false information about the elections, conditioning voting decision.³

Big Data and Micro-targeting

Access to extensive volumes of data from various sources presents significant opportunities for the formulation of effective communication strategies, as it facilitates the dissemination of messages to micro-segmented audience groups based on their individual characteristics. However, substantial challenges arise in managing this data, particularly concerning the right to privacy. These challenges not only stem from the widespread collection of data without prior consent from individuals, but also from the potential for predictive analysis based on psychological profiles. The 2018 Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal exemplified this issue, as the British data analysis firm was accused of unlawfully accessing and exploiting the personal data of 87 million Facebook users. This information was subsequently utilized to develop a powerful software program capable of predicting and influencing the voting behaviors of American voters at the polls.⁴

Bowen (2013) asserted that the rapidly evolving digital communication landscape “only increases the ethical imperative for accuracy, honesty, and transparency” (p. 131). The examples outlined above illuminate some of the practical challenges that public relations professionals may encounter when advising clients to developing authentic and transparent communication practices. In a competitive market, there is an inherent tendency to adopt innovative and effective strategies. But the voracious pace of digital

3. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/sep/12/twitter-ai-bot-grok-election-misinformation>

4. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/06/cambridge-analytica-how-turn-clicks-into-votes-christopher-wylie>

communication allied to the AI technology will leave little room for ethical reflection. This is particularly concerning given that a lack of clarity regarding the sender's identity and objectives, combined with persuasive and manipulative techniques, significantly hinders the possibility of genuine dialogical communication. In fact, as Bachmann (2019) rightly pointed out - the exploitation of digital technologies in public relations does not promote mutually beneficial relations between all audiences, but rather "generates moral indifference and moral blindness" in attempts to win over audiences (pp. 327-328).

According to the study developed by Hagelstein, Einwiller and Zerfass (2021), 86% of the public relations professionals surveyed indicated that their personal values and beliefs, alongside their organization's ethical guidelines, are the most significant resources for addressing moral issues. However, current codes of conduct in public relations are outdated in light of the challenges posed by digital communications and AI. Global Alliance and other professional association are already working on this topic, but much more need to be done to develop ethical guidelines that can provide explicit advice in the era of digital communication and artificial intelligence.

The report by the Commission on Public Relations Education, titled "CPRE Fast Forward: Ethics Education: Recommendations for PR Curriculum," (2022) advocates for the incorporation of an ethics curriculum within higher education programs offering communication and public relations courses. There continues to be a pressing need for both undergraduate and postgraduate courses that enhance the ethical understanding of professionals and inform their decision-making processes. Engaging in classroom debates on ethical issues will better prepare a new generation of professionals for an environment that may not invariably prioritize truth or democratic values. It is essential to equip future public relations practitioners with the critical tools and ethical framework necessary to navigate the complex challenges of our time effectively.

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HABERMAS'S COMMUNICATIVE ACTION AND THE CONSTRUCTIVIST-RELATIONAL THEORY AS REFERENCES FOR THE COMMUNICATION OF SUSTAINABILITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Introduction

We are observing the emergence of a global movement of organisations that are committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were proposed by the United Nations as a global development agenda to be achieved by 2030. As an integral component of this social context, organisations, particularly private entities, have assumed a pioneering role in this process of transformation (Vilaça, 2013). Frequently, these organisations perceive that a planet-friendly approach can confer a competitive advantage in the face of a society that is increasingly aware of sustainability issues (Henriques & Sant'Ana, 2013). Nevertheless, sustainability is regarded as a novel mode of thinking and business practice, wherein subjects are placed at the core of the process (Galleli, 2015, p. 148). In this context, it is incumbent upon organisational communication to disseminate information, stimulate collaborative interactions and promote understanding for the construction of meaning and awareness about sustainability (Kunsch & Oliveira, 2009). This is because the organisation and its communication have a symbiotic relationship with

each other (Kunsch, 2008). Nevertheless, irrespective of the degree of depth behind these changes, the communication strategies that accompany them must be guided by transparency and authenticity (Galleli, 2015). Otherwise, they will jeopardise the reputation that has been built up over time (Jong, Huluba & Beldad, 2020).

In the context of organisational communication for sustainable development, Genç (2017) posits that it shares certain similarities with other communication approaches, but is particularly efficacious in fostering inter-organisational stakeholder engagement. In this way, consideration of sustainability communication in organisations implies acceptance of the strategic mistake of assuming that the mere deposition of content intended to become common, and the disregard of the critical power inherent to the receiver and their interactions, constitutes a viable method of constructing meaning in social life (Vilaça, 2013). The literature concludes that the construction of reality occurs through interaction between subjects, that is to say, through communication (Galleli, 2015). Consequently, the promotion of interaction based on dialogue generates mutual interpretations, which represent a fundamental condition for the consensus and acceptance of a new reality. This understanding identifies a process of organisational maturity that considers communication to be a strategic position in the context of sustainability requirements (Batistella & Marchiori, 2013).

Habermas and the practice of communicative action

The Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (TAC) (1984) makes a significant contribution to the advancement of studies on organisational communication for sustainability. It establishes ethics as a normative imperative and places it at the centre of the discussion, thus providing a valuable framework for understanding the role of ethics in organisational communication. In addition to ethical regulations, the aforementioned author devotes his academic career to the pursuit of a democratic and cooperatively motivated model that could facilitate communication between subjects, with the objective of achieving fair solutions to conflicts and moral problems

(Marques, 2015). Habermas advocated for the establishment of a forum for discussion that is structured around dialogue and reciprocal negotiation, with a focus on networks of exchange and discursive justifications (Oliveira, 2013).

In the view of Jürgen Habermas (1984), the functional aspect of communicative action is to transmit and revitalise culture, promote social integration and consolidate group solidarity, thereby facilitating the formation of personal identities. However, Habermas (1996) emphasises that, in addition to the communicative action he advocates, the practice of communication can also encompass other forms of rationality, which can be embedded in the exchanges supported by language. In this regard, the author distinguishes communicative action from other forms of action, including instrumental, teleological, and normative action. These other models are said to pursue an objective in a rational manner, following a success-oriented strategic direction. In such cases, language is employed for the sole purpose of influencing outcomes in a way that benefits the speaker. This is described as an “exacerbated instrumental rationality” (Marchiori & Galleli, 2017, p. 6). From the perspective of sustainability, it is crucial to underscore that “instrumental communication or even strategic communication do not take the individual to that level of awareness and commitment necessary to understand sustainability issues and how crucial they are for the organization and society as a whole” (Marchiori, Cavenaghi & Dias, 2018, p.2246).

Therefore, irrespective of whether the action in question is instrumental or normative, the discourse will be unilateral and communication may be influenced by third-party interests (Marchiori & Galleli, 2017). This is in contrast to the characteristics of an authentic communicative action.

In his 1984 work, Habermas posits that mutual understanding can be achieved through an open and negotiated process, rather than through imposition. This would permit the expression of disparate perceptions and conflicts of opinion in communication interactions, based on arguments that support them (Fossá & Cardoso, 2008). Despite the fact that Habermas

(1984) asserts that communicative action does not conclude with the act of understanding, its essence can be defined as the comprehension of the other, which represents a form of interaction that is “coordinated through speech acts” (Habermas, 1984, p. 101). In his description of his theory of speech acts, Austin (1962) identifies in language, in addition to its descriptive function, the capacity to initiate action, insofar as everything that is said is intended to provoke a movement. This concept is reinforced by the opinion of Berger and Luckmann (1966), who consider language to be a special form of objectification, with a central role in the construction of knowledge about reality.

In light of the organisational environment, its essence and pragmatism, it would be illogical to approach communicative action, as described by Habermas, without the intention of provoking an action. Consequently, Knoblauch (2020) enables us to progress in this analysis by asserting that any social action with discernible consequences must be a communicative action, and thus, objectified. The concept of objectification, as posited by Shultz and Luckmann (1984), represents the nexus between intention and the communicative action itself. When objectives are linked to action, they become embedded in social reality, which is then learned through experience in the world and constructed through communicative action. Consequently, these actions are reciprocal and arise from the objectification of a shared world, thereby reinforcing sociability (Knoblauch, 2020).

According to Hubert Knoblauch (2020), Habermas’ concept of communicative action is based on the assumption that language is the foundation for social interaction. This implies that language is the means through which individuals become engaged with the world and with one another (Brandão, 2012). Accordingly, in order to comprehend the communicative actions of individuals, it is essential to consider their social interactions. These interactions are characterised by intentionalities that drive the pursuit of interactive language dynamics, wherein all participants have the capacity to be influenced and to influence others. In relation to sustainability, Felix Guatarri (1999) posits that it is only through the articulation between

the environment, social agents and human subjectivity that it is possible to achieve this goal. This interaction should be prioritised as a means of constructing meaning for the emergence of a new understanding. In this context, language is not only a means of transmitting content but also the means through which everyone can share understanding of the issue. This reinforces the need for communicative action rather than unilateral action.

The script for this communicative action concludes with the assertion of the verbal expression that seeks the agreement of the other, who, in turn, if not subject to some command, may express disagreement. Accordingly, the consensus theory also encompasses dissent and is founded upon the tenets of truth, veracity, and correction (Marchiori & Galleli, 2017, p. 7). The listener comprehends the statement, assumes a stance, and adheres to the associated action commitments (Knoblauch, 2020, p. 61). Each utterance is open to criticism and requires justification, thereby generating claims of validity, fostering understanding of others, and eliciting their cooperation (Habermas, 1984).

In communicative action, participants are not primarily oriented towards their own individual success, they pursue their individual objectives respecting the condition that they can harmonize their action plans on the basis of a common definition of the situation (Habermas, 1984, p.285).

If the objective of the action is to gain understanding, then it is communicative in nature. Conversely, when the action is covert and strategic, at least one of the parties is oriented towards success, leading the others to believe that all presupposed positions of communicative action have already been satisfied (Habermas, 1984, p. 332). This attitude presents an obstacle to the advancement of the construction of meaning and dissemination of the concept of sustainability, given that issues related to this theme are still characterised by high levels of complexity and uncertainty. In such contexts, communication plays a fundamental role in sharing information between agents, suggesting greater dialogue and involvement of interested actors

(Genç, 2017). These insights lead to the proposition that it is necessary to eschew the rationality of strategic communication in favour of advancing sustainable development. This entails subjects recognising the reality to which they belong and “transform[ing] it in different daily interactions” (Galleli, 2015, p.150).

The Theory of Communicative Action posits that adherence to the practices of organisational communication, as proposed by Burkart (2007), when informed by Habermasian principles, serves to defend his approach to Consensus-Oriented Public Relations (COPR). This illuminates the relationship between specialists in PR and their target audiences. In situations with a high probability of conflict, companies and organisations are compelled to present compelling arguments to communicate their interests and ideas. It is of paramount importance that their audiences comprehend their actions (Burkart, 2007, p. 250).

Overcoming the weaknesses of TAC

In Habermas’s concept of communicative action, communication occurs in a socially observable manner and is associated with a form of objectification. This distinguishes it from an abstract issue and instead makes it an objective one, which enables the construction of social reality. This process not only fosters a connection between the participants but also encompasses a third dimension that transcends the social bond, such as the materialisation of action (Knoblauch, 2020). However, Habermas’ proposition has been critiqued on the grounds that it fails to adequately address the constitution of the subjects of this social relationship. These subjects, when afforded the opportunity for discussion, attempt to achieve emancipation through discursive practice and public justification (Marques, 2015). The criticism is that these subjects should have credentials that would enable them to take a stand, construct and present arguments with confidence and expression (Marques, 2013). This would allow them to claim validation for their intentions under a high standard of cognition and language, which are not common skills for all subjects. Angela Marques (2013, p. 83) therefore

asserts that any solution to moral problems that fails to acknowledge the unequal distribution of linguistic competence is, in effect, perpetuating social and political inequalities.

The communicative action model is predicated on the assumption of egalitarian thinking, wherein development opportunities, whether personal or professional, are offered and accessible to all subjects. However, this is not reflective of the actual circumstances. The model's limitations stem from the presence of social inequalities and relations of power and domination, which give rise to communicative asymmetries that impede speakers from influencing the deliberation in a manner aligned with their intentions, even when they have the opportunity to speak. In this regard, organisations present a significant challenge to the validation of TAC as a model for organisational communication. In such contexts, communicative and dialogic exchanges must account for the devaluation of interlocutors and their arguments in the face of status asymmetries between participants (Marques & Mafra, 2014).

When the focus is on sustainability, it is important to consider that the concept implies recognising that aspects such as the protection and conservation of the environment, cultural diversity and social equity are requirements for its evolution (Rattner, 1999). This, in the opinion of Roberto Guimarães (2006), gives a status of greater amplitude and dynamism to this discussion, in addition to the need for reflection and consensus. In light of the pluralistic perspective that the sustainability approach demands, Marques and Mafra (2014) advise that, in the face of disagreement, this should not be overlooked, as well as the controversial aspect of the organisational structure with regard to power and control. Instead, forms of dialogical interactions that can contribute to the identification of negotiation paths should be evaluated. It is only through the convergence of discourses and practices that the transformation of human values and behaviours on a large scale will become meaningful (Soares, 2009, p. 31). According to Galleli (2015), the Habermasian perspective offers an opportunity for organisations to re-evaluate their approach to sustainability communication.

This should be based on ethical, truthful, just and respectful communication with all stakeholders, who are members of the same community and contribute to the construction of organisational reality within an environment that provides spaces for discussion.

Inclusive communication proposed by Deetz's Constructivist-Relational model

Constructivist-relational theories are grounded in the notion that experience, the meaning derived from it, and personal identities are shaped by communication processes (Marchiori et al., 2018, p. 2243). Consequently, the theory developed by Stanley Deetz (2010), Politically Attentive Relational Constructionism (PARC), aligns perfectly with approaches to communicating sustainable development. These approaches underscore the necessity and significance of collaborative actions involving the state, society, and organisations. They emphasise the necessity for all thinking in this regard to maintain a systemic perspective and to avoid limiting or isolating the participation of the diverse actors that comprise the world of life in the context of this global challenge.

As Stanley Deetz (2010) notes, there are various approaches to evaluating organisational communication and its associated consequences and forms of interaction. The key challenge lies in identifying those that enhance decision-making from a constructivist-relational theoretical perspective. In this context, the forms of interaction differ according to the conceptions about the production of meaning, based on the different levels of audience inclusion in these interactive processes (Deetz, 2010). It is crucial to emphasise that when conceptualising communication as a process that not only constitutes a specific reality but also has the potential to transform and promote change, it becomes evident that the sustainability of organisational processes can be advanced. This entails a process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning, which is of paramount importance.

Those who espouse the constructivist-relational model of communication posit that organisational communication is a social process whereby meaning is constituted as a consequence of interaction with the world (Hosking, Dachler & Gergen, 1995). From this perspective, it can be assumed that the concept of the personal is continuously reinterpreted as a result of the interactive process (Deetz, 2010, p. 86). This understanding is reflected in Habermas' propositions of communicative action, which serve to reinforce our perceptions. It can therefore be seen that the communication-sustainability-society triad is connected in a relationship of interdependence (Vilaça, 2013, p. 208). It is also evident that broad public participation in decision-making processes is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development (Viegas & Teodosio, 2013).

In light of this challenge, organisations are compelled to re-examine their conceptualisation of communication. This new conceptualisation, as posited by Deetz (2010, p. 85), differs from previous ones in that it is not merely a matter of transmission, but rather a process of meaning, information and knowledge formation, and the degree to which this process is free and open in relation to the inclusion of people. When the focus of meaning construction is centred on the individual, meaning is considered to be an individual construction, which awaits communication to be expressed. This presupposes a linear model of interaction, limited to the mere transmission of information (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Accordingly, an analysis of organisational communication practices and dynamics reveals two distinct categories: those that facilitate increased control and those that strive for consensus through more open and inclusive processes (Deetz, 2010).

In order to elucidate the distinction between communicative action and strategic action as postulated by Habermas' theory (1984), we may draw an analogy with the reciprocal and non-reciprocal interaction observed in constructivist-relational dynamics. Deetz (2010) posits that reciprocity predicts responsibility accepted and shared, offering choice and interaction options that promote greater symmetry in communication. In this scenario of reciprocal interactions, the communication of sustainability has become

a more complex process, necessitating greater effort from the organisation to promote conviction. Indeed, reciprocity leads to the development of conceptions that help people know how to allow all points of view to have an opportunity to influence collective decisions; to be open to changes due to new ideas and relationships with the world and with others; to resist attempts at control. (Deetz, 2010, p.87).

In order to relate conceptions of meaning to the level of inclusion and interaction promoted by communication, Deetz and Radford (2010) present two possible scenarios. 1) When the conception of meaning is centred on the person, and there is reciprocity, the main results of this communication are: freedom of expression, deliberation, negotiation and application of legal rights. 2) When meaning emerges from the constructivist-relational concept, through communicative reciprocity, there is a guarantee that all relevant positions are heard, the formation of meaning occurs freely and openly, and pluralism and differences are maintained. The authors posit that the second scenario represents a model of participatory democracy (Deetz & Radford, 2010), whereas the first scenario aligns more closely with a liberal democratic model. While the latter does promote freedom of expression, it has prompted questions among constructivist-relational researchers about the extent to which these practices truly embody democratic principles (Deetz, 2010). In such instances, it is possible to gain a voice without actually speaking. At the same time, one can speak from a discursive model that silences one's own voice. This model gives citizens the impression that they are expressing their own demands when, in fact, it reproduces statements manufactured by control devices (Marques, 2013, p. 84).

Collaboration as a model for communicating sustainability

In the participatory democracy described by Deetz (2010), the construction of thoughts, feelings, perceptions, meanings and knowledge is conducted in an egalitarian and collaborative manner. In this proposal, collaborative interactions serve to challenge the status quo and put current opinions to the test, thereby facilitating the reformulation of previously established rules

through the open expression of opinions. “Communication is not merely a peripheral aspect of organisational life; rather, it is the very foundation upon which the entire structure is built. It is an inherently political process, shaped by the interplay of forces that give rise to the myriad understandings of organisational life” (Deetz, 2010, p. 91). In light of this, scholars of constructivist-relational theories seek to enhance organisational interaction models with a view to optimising existing deliberation practices, including deliberation, dialogue and collaboration (Deetz, 2010). Among these practices, collaboration emerges as the most suitable communication strategy for sustainability.

Upon analysis of each case, it became evident that: 1) “Deliberation represents a more intentional endeavour to utilise reciprocity and differences with a view to enhancing decision-making processes” (Deetz, 2010, p. 96). The focus is on the selection of the common good over personal preferences based on well-argued rights claims, where decisions, once made, are collectively accepted and directly affect all subjects (Silva, 2010). Secondly, dialogue has been part of recurring discussions about organisational communication (Deetz, 2010, p.96). It is frequently observed that this approach can be beneficial in reducing tensions and fostering a sense of community. However, it is important to note that it does not inherently possess a decision-making model and is not always conducive to generating innovative solutions.

Conversely, contemporary communication studies have increasingly focused on collaboration as a means of consolidating these processes. This approach is believed to be the most authentic and productive way of making decisions. Through collaboration, we can engage in a multitude of communicative processes that imbue meaning and drive social transformation (Hepp & Hasenbrink, 2015). This aligns with the principles of communicative constructivism. “Collaboration shares experiences of reciprocity with dialogue, but its purpose is mutual creative decisions” (Deetz, 2010, p. 96), which aligns with the objectives of organisations in recent decades. This approach allows for the interpretation of the situation in a cooperative way, as a collective construction of meanings (Galleli, 2015, p. 155).

Gray (1989) asserts that collaboration represents the optimal, and arguably most authentic, methodology for resolving conflicts and identifying solutions. This is based on the integration of internal and external organisational information and forces, with the objective of reaching mutually satisfactory long-term agreements. In a context of constant change, characterised by diversity and interdependence, where “ecological and social sustainability is highly dependent on multiple values and perspectives, which are brought into the business context” (Deetz, 2010, p. 92), organisational communication theories have a responsibility to respond to corporate imperatives in this context. This requires a high degree of creativity, commitment and compliance with standards in order to find the best way to communicate sustainability.

Conclusion

The theme of sustainability, despite still presenting many normative weaknesses on the part of the state and a lack of knowledge on the part of society (Baldissera & Kaufmann, 2013), is an undeniable and imperative need to be faced. In this context, organisations occupy a complex and nuanced position. On the one hand, they have the potential to impede the achievement of global sustainable objectives. However, on the other hand, they can act as effective collaborators and educators, utilising their communication as a means of promoting the concept (Vieira & Gonçalves, 2014).

In order to collaborate with the communication strategy of organisations, theories have been discussed and evaluated by communication scholars in the search for best practices and approaches. Among these, TAC and PARC present several positive characteristics when considered in the context of the aspects that communication for sustainability requires. In their respective works, Galleli, Baldissera, Deetz and Kunsch posit that organisations wishing to communicate sustainability must adhere to a set of fundamental principles. These include the use of ethical discourse, the construction of meaning through collective communicative interactions and the formation of consensus through collaborative practices based on reciprocity.

In light of the objective of this study, which is to establish the legitimacy of the normative imperatives for a theory of organisational communication for sustainability, based on the theories of communicative action put forth by Jürgen Habermas (1984) and the model of constructivist-relational communicative rationality by Stanley Deetz (2010), the findings of the study point to the following directions: Despite some inconsistencies in the organisational scenario, Habermas' theory of Communicative Action must be preserved as a value reference, particularly in light of the challenge of mobilising audiences for the transformation of culture. Moreover, this theory exhibits several favourable attributes in relation to the necessities of communication for sustainability. The primary advantage is the assurance of an arena for discourse and deliberation, guided by ethical principles and respect for diverse perspectives. At this juncture, it becomes evident that Habermas' theory can be aligned with the insights of Stanley Deetz (2010). This is because both theories espouse similar characteristics, particularly those pertaining to constructivist-relational theoretical perspectives on organisational communication. Habermas' theory indicates that mutual understanding and the avoidance of imposition are possible outcomes of openness to dialogue and negotiation. However, Deetz (2010) posits that dialogue lacks a decision-making model and rarely produces creative solutions. It is this author's opinion that organisational communication must seek a model that consolidates processes that go beyond dialogue, but promotes consensus based on a collaborative construction of meaning, which takes place through communicative interactions. This approach would be the most authentic and productive with regard to decision-making and awareness about sustainability.

This study thus highlights the necessity for the development of novel research, namely a theoretical model resulting from the intersection of these two evaluated theories, as a foundation for a collaborative theory of communication for sustainability. These are the challenges facing organisations in communicating sustainability, based on the objectives set out in the UN 2030 Agenda. This should inspire academics and professionals in strategic

and organisational communication to engage with this area, contributing to the future advancement of society and organisations. As Leff (2010, p.183) notes, we are facing a crossroads for sustainability, a dispute over nature and a controversy over alternative meanings of sustainable development. It is therefore evident that creating an inclusive environment in which all individuals can participate is not merely a fundamental aspect of communication; it is a prerequisite for the continued existence of any given society.

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UNIVERSITY FOURTH MISSION AND SOCIAL IMPACT. ETHIC IMPERATIVE AND RELATIONAL CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGH EDUCATION IN ITALY

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate the social mission of universities. The topic is currently emerging in the university context both in Italy and abroad, according to different definitions: while in Italy the label “Fourth mission” is the most diffuse, at European level regulations invite universities to align themselves to a more advanced concept of “impact”. From this context, the present study refers to “social mission”, in order to include and compare both the emerging perspectives and dimensions.

Studies dedicated to this topic – whose conceptual boundaries are dynamic and not clear – have focused on some major dimensions and analytical perspectives that converge in exploring, from different disciplines and points of view, the socio-cultural values of higher education in contemporary society (Riviezzo et al. 2020). In particular, the social mission of the university includes an additional and diverse set of strategic areas and activities carried out by universities to express their responsibility towards their internal and external

1. The article is the result of the collaboration among the Authors. In the final draft, Introduction and section 1 are to be attributed to Lucia D'Ambrosi and Valentina Martino; section 2 to Paolo Brescia; sections 3, 4 and the Conclusion to all the Authors.

stakeholders, also in the key to social inclusion and innovation, collective well-being and sustainability (Blasi 2023; Blasi & Romagnosi 2014; RUS 2021). Such a social role, which emerged after the Covid-19 pandemic and is hardly institutionalised in Italy, aims to integrate and complete the other three and more traditional missions of the university: research, teaching and, finally, the Third mission and public engagement (Loi & Di Guardo 2015; Martino 2016; Mazza & Valentini 2020).

From this scenario, the article aims to address the issue of the “new missions” of universities within the conceptual framework of corporate and public communication. It examines the current trends in the evolution of the social mission of universities in Italy and abroad, the degree of institutionalisation expressed in the Italian academic governance, the consequent relational and communicative challenges for universities, also in comparison with European trends and other types of organisations.

University’s emerging missions and communication: a literature review

An interdisciplinary review was developed and discussed, which aims to investigate the evolution of university’s missions and of their own management and communication processes within the framework of public and corporate communication theories. The review focuses on the evolution of the university communication over the years, considering those characteristics and situational conditions that distinguish universities’ case and make their own communication and relational models so unique with respect to any other public, private and non-profit organisation (Morcellini & Martino 2005).

In the last twenty-five years, university communication, as well as the whole public sector communication, has been subjected to deep changes, whose impact remains only partially evident from the relevant literature and studies proposed by international scholars. Indeed, both normative and technological innovations have changed relationships between institutions and citizens: universities have become more aware of the need to respond

effectively to such a challenge, to effectively communicate their own key messages and cultivate quality and long-term relationships with strategic stakeholders. University communication has been affected by the innovations introduced at first by the web and then by social media in terms of communication tools, activities and professional skills, as reported and documented by Italian scholars in several fields: university communication (Bracciale & Martino 2003; Martino 2011; Morcellini & Martino 2005; Mazzei 2000, 2004; Rolando 2005; Pattuglia 2005); innovation (Aquilani & Lovari 2009; Lovari & Giglietto 2012; Lovari 2014); policies and governance (Boffo 2003).

Considering this framework, a literature review was conducted by the authors to retrace and propose three specific stages in the evolution of university communication over the last decades in Italy: the discovery phase (2000-2010), the institutionalisation phase (2010-2020), and the post-Covid phase (2020-nowadays).

University communication over the years: the discovery phase

University communication arises as a strategic field in the national and international context around the beginning of the millennium, as a set of strategies, activities and tools used by academic institutions to reach the most strategic stakeholders: students, scholars, technical-administrative staff, parents of students, schools, partners, institutions, private companies, and other publics (Marchione 1995, 2002; Mazzei 2000; Boffo 2003).

From 2000, Italian universities faced a drastic reform of the educational cycles, which changed from a 5-year single cycle to a two-cycle system, comprehending a first bachelor's degree (3 years) and, secondly, a master (2 years)². That affected the characteristics of the student population in a very sharp way, increasing the competition between universities. It also demands investment in guidance activities to implement and explain the normative change to publics, as well as reconsider the strategic role

2. In this paper we are referring to the so-called "Berlinguer-Zecchino reform" (ex D.M. 509/1999, Law 30/2000).

of corporate communication in the light of the aforementioned evolutions (Bracciale & Martino 2003).

In parallel, several innovations were introduced in the broader context of public administrations, since early 2000s³. To this fundamental regulation a strong acceleration is due to ordinate and institutionalise the public communication sector in Italy, offering new opportunities to improve relationships between public administrations, at local and national level, and citizens (Faccioli 2000).

In such a changing context, the scientific literature started investigating the specific objectives and benefits related to university communication, improving the relationships with students and citizens, as well as enhancing the public image and reputation of universities, so far perceived as bureaucratic and “close” organisations. Scholars agree in suggesting three major scopes of university communication: to improve the quality of services; to reinforce corporate visibility and identity of academic organisations; and to attract resources, both students and fundings (Mazzei 2004). These objectives, integrated, could ensure a good reputation supporting in the long term the number of enrolments and the attractiveness of that academic institution and, thus, their competitiveness.

Investing in relationships and reputation management helps universities to improve their teaching and research results and to engage both the academic community and the external public (Mazzei 2000), fostering quality relationships between universities and society “with the purpose of building and maintaining the public good and trust between citizens and authorities” (Canel & Luoma-aho 2019, p. 33). Investing in communication while upholding transparency, credibility and a strong commitment to public service can have social and economic spillovers in generating impact and public engagement (Morcellini & Martino 2005; Boffo & Cocorullo 2019; Lovari 2010). To this purpose, universities can equip themselves with charters of

3. With the approval of the Italian Law 150/2000 which concerns the “regulation of information and communication activities of public administrations”.

services, charters of values and identity manuals to which all members of the community must comply.

In this experimental phase of university communication, because of both the educational reform in Italy and digital acceleration at the beginning of the Millennium, the Italian Association of University Communicators (AICUN)⁴, founded in 1992, played a leading role, by promoting awareness-raising initiatives and encouraging universities to understand the opportunities to strategically communicate to their publics (Martino 2011).

The attention towards relations and communication brings universities to pass by the traditional model, based on the separation from the context, for which universities have been often described in the past as close institutions and “ivory towers.” This phase sees the university in transition from the original “collegium” to a more modern status of “company university” (Mazzei 2000) considering students as partners, employing business-like managerial methods to improve its efficiency and effectiveness, using communication to achieve strategic goals (Martino 2011). This vision has found confirmations (Lapsley 2003) and even some critical voices, claiming the uniqueness of university as a form of organisational and social community, rather than as addressed merely to the spillage of knowledge and the attraction of resources (Lombardinilo 2014, Morcellini 2004). On the other hand, the innovation of universities has been criticised on the fact that the privatisation of knowledge may affect the autonomy of culture and education (Connell, 2019).

The institutionalisation phase

In the second decade of the 2000s, university communication is marked by other significant changes and challenges in Italy. In this period - that goes from the 2010 to 2020, here defined as the “institutionalisation phase” - communication starts to be systematically managed by university institutions to support the rise of some university’s “new missions”, which are additional

4. AICUN members are professionals involved, at various levels, in communication offices and activities carried on by universities, higher education institutions and research centres in Italy (www.aicun.it, accessed July 15, 2023).

to didactic and research activities. Higher education institutions become more aware of the role of communication and integrate it in their own governance system, to value relational approaches as a fundamental lever for strategic management and decision-making. In this stage, universities institutionalise communication (Grunig 2016), according to a “process by which organisations and procedures acquire value and stability” (Huntington 1996, p.12)⁵. Considering the three main objectives of university communication (Mazzei 2000), the literature points out a decisive shift, from the original objective of attracting more enrolled students by promoting visibility, to that of cultivating quality relationships with the stakeholders by supporting corporate identity and reputation. Indeed, according to a normative framework and an advanced paradigm of communication and public relations (Grunig 2016), other relevant analytic perspectives begin to emerge, such as corporate ethics and responsibility, public and stakeholder engagement, reputation management, purpose-driven management and shared value creation process (Invernizzi & Romenti 2020).

From such priorities, it becomes relevant to improve the quality of services and guarantee accountability to the distinct categories of stakeholders in the long term. Quality assurance and public evaluation systems is coordinated by the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR), which was established just in those years⁶. In parallel, an increasing attention emerges toward reputation as an intangible asset (Canel & Luoma-aho 2018): ethics and transparency become the guiding values in communication activities both on- and offline (Pattuglia 2005, Ciani 2011).

For universities, the relationships with the economic and socio-institutional environment becomes critical. In this context it is possible to observe

5. Referring to institutionalisation, we only mention some of the main authors: Meyer & Rowan 1991; Di Maggio & Powell 1991; Invernizzi & Romenti 2009.

6. According to ANVUR website: “ANVUR oversees the national quality evaluation system for universities and research bodies. It is responsible for the quality assessment of the activities carried out by universities and research institutes, recipients of public funding. It is also entrusted with steering the Independent Evaluation Units’ activities, and with assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of public funding programmes or incentive programmes for research and innovation activities” (www.anvur.it, accessed July 15, 2023).

the rise of some “new missions” for Italian universities (Riviezzo et al. 2020). The one emerging at first, residually named Third mission, refers to a varied set of activities and services aiming at integrating the traditional missions’ universities carry out. Its scope is to enhance the results of university’s research and didactic activity on an economic, cultural and social level, stimulating the attitude of universities to relate with the community and other stakeholders, to generate academic and common value⁷ (Martino 2018). According to the conceptualization, which has been systematised by ANVUR in various documents and reports, the Third mission is segmented in three major strands: innovation and technology transfer, lifelong education, public engagement⁸.

Around the end of this phase, a specific Social mission (labelled as “Fourth mission”) emerged in the Italian context, based on the strategic social role academic community plays in society.

The post-Covid phase

The Covid-19 pandemic has represented a turning point for the public communication sector (Lovari et al. 2020), also in the context of university communication, as well as for corporate communication at large (Martino & Rossotti 2021). The emergency stimulated universities to adopt new communication processes and strategies in response to the crisis, increasingly oriented towards the integrated use of various channels, in particular social media to foster stakeholder engagement.

Several studies point the opportunities related to an inclusive and ethical communication, based on listening to the citizens, gradually represent one of the most important areas to reinforce trust and social cohesion (Canel & Luoma-aho 2019; Ducci et al. 2020; Lovari et al. 2020), to promote trust in the contexts in which they operate (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2018). Public engagement in decision-making has become a necessary condition for effective

7. “A first attempt to evaluate the Third mission was made in the context of the Vqr 2004-2010” (Romagnosi 2016, p. 16).

8. The institutionalisation of the Third mission has also increased in the light of the work carried out by ANVUR thanks to an increasingly accurate standardisation and evaluation of the sector’s indicators (Martino 2016).

governance (OECD 2009), to improve performance to be competitive and entrepreneurial (Kretz & Sá 2013).

The challenge for universities has been to preserve their academic reputation in a crisis context, characterised by growing distrust towards institutions. Two main issues are imposed to the academic institutions, as evidenced by ANVUR 2023 report: firstly, to effectively address and mitigate the significant challenges posed by the Covid-19 crisis and its ensuing restriction (Lovari et al. 2022), including a notable inclination towards online university alternatives; secondly, to proactively safeguard against the concerning trend of university study dropouts⁹.

Within this context, university responsibility becomes an imperative to assure social inclusion and equity, innovation, collective well-being and sustainability (Goddard 2016; RUS 2021). A specific social/Fourth mission, identifying an additional and varied set of scopes and activities carried on by universities to express their responsibility towards the stakeholders, emerges especially after the Covid-19 pandemic to integrate and support the other three traditional missions (didactic, research and Third mission). Although this field remains scarcely institutionalised in Italy, in the last months of 2023 the new evaluation rules provided by ANVUR and referring to the activities universities carried out or implemented in the 2020-24 period¹⁰, prescribe for the first time an economic valorisation of the social impact produced by universities in their interacting with local and global communities.

Research questions and methods

From such an evolving scenario, this research aims to investigate the emerging concept of Fourth mission/social impact emerging nowadays in the

9. According to the 2023 ANVUR Report (p. 16): “The increase in the university population has been particularly relevant for telematic universities [...]. In this regard, it should be noted that dropping out of university studies is a phenomenon that also occurs after the first year, as shown by the 20.4% of dropouts after three years of enrolment for three-year degrees, rising to 24.2% after six years”.

10. VQR 2020-2024, available at: <https://www.anvur.it/attivita/vqr/vqr-2020-2024/> (accessed October 31st, 2023).

university context, both in Italy and abroad. In particular, the study explores both the conceptual dimensions and the operational and evaluation activities which define universities' "new missions", in the framework of corporate and public communication.

The research addressed the following questions:

RQ1. What is the level of awareness by Italian universities for the relevance of the emerging missions, the social one? Has there been Fourth mission/ social impact institutionalised in the Italian universities' governance and strategy?

RQ2. What are the specificities of the Italian case in the field of Fourth mission/social impact goals? What are the ongoing trends in the evolution of the university's missions, also in comparison with the international scenario?

RQ3. What are the relational and communication challenges for Italian universities?

The research was carried out from March to June 2023. The research design is composed by an exploratory and mixed-method strategy, divided into two main steps: a background analysis and an in-depth qualitative study.

Stage I

A background analysis aimed to study major trends, experiences, best practices and opportunities, retraced at both international and national level by means of a preliminary review, exploring both the scientific literature and the official documental sources in the sector. A wide-range observation was dedicated to Italian universities' corporate websites, to focus on:

- the official mentions that each university dedicates online to its Fourth mission/ social impact activities, compared with the Third mission settings.
- the degree of institutionalisation expressed in the academic governance and strategic planning.

- context variables (dimensional, historical, geographical) and their possible relations with the development of Fourth mission/ social impact.

Stage II

A qualitative analysis explored in depth the first-hand experiences and points of view expressed by major experts and opinion leaders in Italy (see Table 1), directly participating in the management and innovation processes within universities. In particular, the research was supported by overall 11 in-depth interviews (Guala 1993; Marradi 2007), collected from April to June 2023 in person and online (via Zoom and Google Meet platforms), according to the preference of the interviewees.

The group of key experts includes:

- representatives of university governance and communication (rectors, pro-rectors and delegates committed for the Third and Fourth mission in several universities, professionals participating in the management and innovation process within and members of the major associative networks in the field of university communication)
- academic scholars specialised in the field of university governance and innovation.

Table 1 - An in-depth investigation: panel of experts

Rectors / Pro-rectors/ Delegates committed for the Third/Fourth mission	Professionals coordinating the management and innovation process	Academic scholars	Members of associative networks in the field of university communication
Sapienza University of Rome (2 interviews)	Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR)	University of Naples Federico II	Italian Association of University Communicators (AICUN)
Polytechnic of Bari	Italian Rectors' Conference (CRUI)	University of Milan – Bicocca	European Association of Communication Professionals in Higher Education (EUPRIO)
	Italian University Network for Sustainable Development (RUS)		The Italian Network of Universities and Research Institutions for Public Engagement (APENet)

The script of the interview, including a set of common opening questions, was adapted for each interviewee, to value the single professional profiles and experiences. Interviews, from around 40 minutes to two-hour long, were digitally recorded with the permission of the interviewees, literally transcribed and analysed according to a set of key topics, addressed to the ends of the current paper:

- to retrace the evolution of the contemporary debate around Fourth mission/ social impact from different descriptive perspectives: its distinctive contents and scopes; the potential of innovation in comparison with university's tradition;
- the opportunities and value that Fourth mission/ social impact expresses for the stakeholders and universities themselves;
- the challenges and risks concerning the way the Fourth mission/ social impact is communicated and promoted towards universities' internal and external publics.

A qualitative content analysis of the interviews (Cardano 2003) was conducted, firstly through an individual reading by the researchers involved in the study, and then by a comparison between them with respect to the main considerations that emerged.

Data descriptions and results

The research findings are presented and critically analysed according to two distinct stages. The first one involves a background analysis, delineating the European scenario and the specific characteristics of the Italian university system. Subsequently, the results are delved into the viewpoints expressed by a panel of experts, interviewed about the emerging missions of university and their institutionalisation within the framework of strategic governance.

The European scenario

University Social mission aiming at generating a positive impact for community and society is an emerging topic in the context of European Higher Education. According to the European University Association (EUA), such policy is oriented toward the service of civic development and sustainability, by “evaluating and being accountable for the appropriate adjustment of principles and values, as well as policies and activities” (EUA 2021, p.6).

Universities are called to cope with the challenges arising from the so-called “knowledge society” and a rapid global competition; at the same time, university, as a very special kind of cultural and ethical institution, has a responsibility to become an institutional player in the advocacy for social justice, inclusion and wellbeing. The major crisis in society, inequalities, diversity, social mismatches posed by a hyper-complex society, in the relationship between the global and local: all these are crucial challenges for university (Goddard & Vallance 2013), which can no longer estrange itself in a distant world of self-referential knowledge (Mazzei 2004).

Considering this scenario, the concepts of social responsibility (SR) and responsible research and innovation (RRI) have emerged as relevant aspects of universities’ accountability and legitimacy, particularly in the last decade, to contribute positively to society and community outreach (Godonoga & Sporn 2022). Responsibility is considered a qualitative indicator of the long-term impact university produces on the surrounding context: “an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia” (REF 2019, p. 26).

Through the Twentieth century, universities are called to incorporate the social mission in their own core activities to assess their contribution to societal development and the effects of their engagement with society (Hart & Northmore 2011). Notably, within the Anglo-Saxon higher-education system, the topic of impact as a normative and performative aspect for universities has grown in relevance and encouraged guidelines and strategic

plans to support outreach impact and community engagement. The REF – Research Excellence Framework, which allocates a percentage of funding to English academic institutions according to the results of case studies based on engagement and impact, is moving in this direction and for the 2028 it will increase the share to 25% of the total funding¹¹.

The Horizon Europe¹² model to assess impact, the so-called “Key impact Pathways”, also deserves a mention. This European legislation defines three types of impact in the research and innovation context: the scientific impact related to supporting the creation and diffusion of high-quality knowledge; the societal impact in developing and implementing EU policies; and the economic impact, to foster all forms of innovation¹³.

After the pandemic, universities worldwide, and especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, have placed additional emphasis on rankings, to showcase their performance and rebuild a positive reputation, being more competitive in the international scenario for social and environmental impact¹⁴. Systems and related tools that identify and represent qualitative and quantitative indexes of an institution’s prestige and reputation have been developed for public information dissemination and quality enhancement.

11. REF 2028 initial decisions, available at: <https://beta.jisc.ac.uk/future-research-assessment-programme/initial-decisions> (accessed October 31, 2023).

12. Horizon Europe 2021-2027 is a broad EU funding program made to enhance research and innovation in the European context. Further information are available at: https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/horizon-europe_en (accessed September 1, 2023).

13. Horizon Europe defines 9 impact pathways (three different pathways per area), which can be found on the European Commission’s website: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/support-policy-making/shaping-eu-research-and-innovation-policy/evaluation-impact-assessment-and-monitoring/horizon-europe-programme-analysis_en#monitoring-horizon-europe (accessed September 1, 2023).

14. The main generalist measurement tools that rank world universities are the ARWU Shanghai, developed by Jiao Tong University, the Times Higher Education World University Ranking (THE) and the QS World University Ranking. To these, are added other less established or impactful generalist rankings, and a very large plethora of theme-specific rankings (by subject). In the world context, the recognized universities are just under 20,000, while the main rankings evaluate about 1,000, less than 10%, and then create rankings organised in the top 100, 200, 400, and rarely beyond the 500th position. Placing in one of these rankings means being recognized as a world-class university with a reputation and – potentially – high overall quality. All these systems periodically publish rankings drawn up based on criteria and indicators that are measured, evaluated and aggregated into measures that generate a score, usually based on data deriving from self-assessments of the universities themselves.

Among the specific rankings, specifically related to the topic of impact, it is possible to mention the Impact Ranking, elaborated by The Times Higher Education (THE). Since 2019 it assesses universities according to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals of "Agenda 2030" in four broad areas: research, stewardship, outreach and teaching. In 2023, Australian and four Canadian institutions are among top 10 of the ranking, while Italy participates only residually: in the top 100 positions, it is possible to find the University of Bologna (23rd), offering various environment friendly and social inclusive programs, and Milan Polytechnic (91st), dedicating a section of its website to sustainable development and the societal impact of academic activities¹⁵.

Though rankings may possess certain limitations in terms of evaluation, their relevance is on the rise within an increasingly competitive global context. Additionally, in a world where opportunities to attract foreign students are growing (the number of people studying abroad has more than doubled in the last decade, with half choosing to study in Europe), a favourable position in international rankings serves to enhance a university's reputation and attractiveness towards potential students and scholars. Furthermore, a positive reputation can significantly impact the attractions of investments and fundings at the local, national and European level.

The specificities of Italian university system and the "new missions"

Italian university system is particularly heterogeneous and includes 141 institutions, spread at national level, with a broad-spectrum offering, divided into three several levels: the basic, the specialist and the Third (Ph.D) cycle¹⁶. There are 99 universities in the Italian national system, 61 of which are state universities, 7 special schools¹⁷, 20 non-state universities and 11

15. The Times Higher Education Impact Rankings are the only global performance database that assess universities against the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The indicators provide comprehensive comparisons between universities, considering four broad areas: research, stewardship, outreach and teaching. Source: <https://the-ranking.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/IMPACT/IMPACT2024/THE.ImpactRankings.METHODOLOGY.2024.pdf> (accessed September 1, 2023).

16. Source: ostat.miur.it (accessed July 15, 2023).

17. The 7 "special schools" constitute centres of excellence in higher education. Three are in Tuscany, two in the North, one in Abruzzo and one in Campania. Source: mur.gov.it (accessed July 10, 2023).

telematic universities. State universities are present in all regions except Valle d'Aosta. Most of them are generalist universities, flanked by four polytechnics (Ancona, Bari, Milan, Turin) and some institutions with a specific focus (universities for foreigners or with high thematic specialisation, like the Orientale of Naples, Foro Italico and IUAV).

For the current research study, institutional websites of the 61 state universities and of 3 schools of excellence were analysed to provide a systematic and comprehensive overview. The background analysis of the institutional websites of the Italian public universities here examined was conducted according to two distinct phases. A first phase aimed to build a set of variables, describing three aspects of the universities analysed: the historical variable (dividing selected universities into two clusters for years of birth); the geographical variable (to analyse the distribution of universities on the Italian territory); the dimensional variable (i.e. the number of students for each university)¹⁸.

Then, for all the universities in this set, an analysis of the map of the university's institutional website (i.e. the "sitemap") was carried out, to verify the following aspects concerning the representation of the "new missions". In particular, it has been evaluated the presence/non-presence of deputy rector/delegate/referent for the Third mission; deputy rector/delegate/referent for the Fourth mission/ social impact; site-section dedicated to the Third mission (or related section); site-section dedicated to the Fourth mission/ social impact (or related section).

From the abovementioned outlook, the presence of the Third and Fourth mission on universities' corporate websites can be considered an indicator of institutionalisation. While about 60% of university websites have a section dedicated to the Third mission (a number that rises if also related labels are included), only 6% of them have a section dedicated to the Fourth mission. The institutionalisation of the Third mission is highlighted also by the significant number of institutions that have appointed a pro-rector or

18. Source: MUR Database (2021-2022 survey).

delegate (68%), while the number of deputy-rectors for the Fourth mission remains still very scarce (9%). Alongside this context analysis, for universities valuing a form of social mission in their own websites and official documents, a further overview was developed, focusing on the definition provided on the institutional website, the source and the section dedicated to such a topic.

The analysis of the descriptive variables showed a very heterogeneous scenario at national level. Starting from CENSIS clusters¹⁹ (according to 2021-2022 data from the MUR database)²⁰, considering only the first two cycles of studies (except in the peculiar cases of institutes of higher studies, which include almost only enrolments among doctoral students), the following picture (Tab.2) emerges at the national level (considering both Polytechnics and the institutes of higher studies already mentioned):

Table 2 – Italian universities for dimensional classes

Dimensional classes	Number of universities
Mega university	11
Large university	19
Medium university	17
Small university	17
Total universities	64

Source: Own elaboration from MUR Database 2021-2022.

As far as the seniority class of universities is concerned, two clusters have been provided analysing the distribution of universities for year of foundation: on the one hand, “historical universities”, founded from 1088 (when the first Italian university, the Almamater of Bologna, was born) to 1949, thus until the immediate after-war period; on the other, “young universities”, founded from and after 1950 (Martino & Lombardi, 2015).

19. CENSIS, a social research institute in Italy, defines “small” universities those with 0 to 10th students, “medium” universities from 10th to 20th students, “large” universities, from 20 to 40th students, and “mega” universities those with more than 40th students.

20. Available at <<http://ustat.miur.it/dati/didattica/italia/atenei>> (accessed July 22, 2023).

Table 3 – Italian universities for seniority classes (n. and %)

Seniority classes	Number of universities
Born from 1950 onwards “Young Universities”	29
Universities born from 1088 to 1949 “Historical universities”	35
Total universities	64

Source: Own elaboration based on Martino & Lombardi (2015) with data MUR Database, 2021-2022.

Universities were also classified according to their geographical location: 23 in Northern Italy, 18 in Central Italy and 23 in the South and on the main islands (18 in Southern Italy and 5 in Islands, Sardinia and Sicily).²¹

The combination of the above-mentioned variables and the data observed from corporate university websites enables us to address some possible correlations in the Italian context:

- universities in the North and Centre of Italy are more committed to Fourth mission/ social impact (22% of them have appointed a pro-rector/included a social mission section on the website etc.);
- the “historic” universities (pre-1950) place notable emphasis on the Fourth mission/ social impact (17% of them include the social mission in official documents);
- “big” and “mega” universities focus particularly on the value of their Fourth mission/ social impact to society.

The social mission and its conceptual dimensions

Background analysis exploring the definition provided on corporate websites highlighted, not least, that in the case of Italian universities, certain specific aspects are prominent. The social mission is considered as an

21. The categories are based on ISTAT data (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica 2016). The regions are thus classified as follows: 1. North: Valle d’Aosta, Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont, Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna; 2. Centre: Tuscany, Umbria, Marches, Lazio; 3. South and Islands: Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, Sicily, Sardinia.

emerging “Fourth dimension” (D’Alessandro 2015) that universities are called upon to espouse so they can respond to society’s demands more effectively, contributing — as a common good in themselves — to the growth of common good for citizens (Milani 2017). The social mission can therefore be understood as a form of political commitment made by academic institutions, representing, as it should, one of the strategic purposes of the university aimed at connecting the sense and compass of the other three more “traditional” missions (Kretz & Sá 2013; Boffo & Cocorullo 2019).

Considering the broader definition of the Third Mission, which often refers to creating “benefits for society” or emphasises a “direct link to the territory”, “technology transfer” and “public engagement”, a specific characteristic emerging from the research is the attitude toward an inside approach. This perspective focuses on the internal social benefits for the academic community - students, scholars, and personnel - to engage with, empower, and enable the organisational community to which they belong, as summarised in Illustration 1.

As discernible from the official mentions²² that each university dedicates to its Fourth mission/social impact activities, it can be defined as:

- development of services, tools and programs aimed at implementing social inclusion and protecting the right to education and gender equality, in line with the objective of making the university an increasingly inclusive community and giving central importance to the value of the individual (Sapienza University of Rome, Lazio);
- the determination of the university to open increasingly to the city, the region, state institutions and the world. Dialogue is not only with the local authorities, but also with schools, museums, civil society and the world of associations (University of Macerata, Marche);
- an action aimed at increasing the quality of life in a local, regional, national, European or international context. The impact is first generated

22. Sources: corporate websites of each university (accessed July 20, 2023).

outside, first and foremost, but derivative effects produced internally must also be considered (University of Piemonte Orientale, Piedmont).

Consequently, the Fourth mission/social impact is closely associated with promoting inclusion and ensuring equal opportunities primarily within the internal community. Thereafter, its positive impact is extended to society at large, surpassing the traditional concept of outreach whereby universities “transfer” value purely to society.

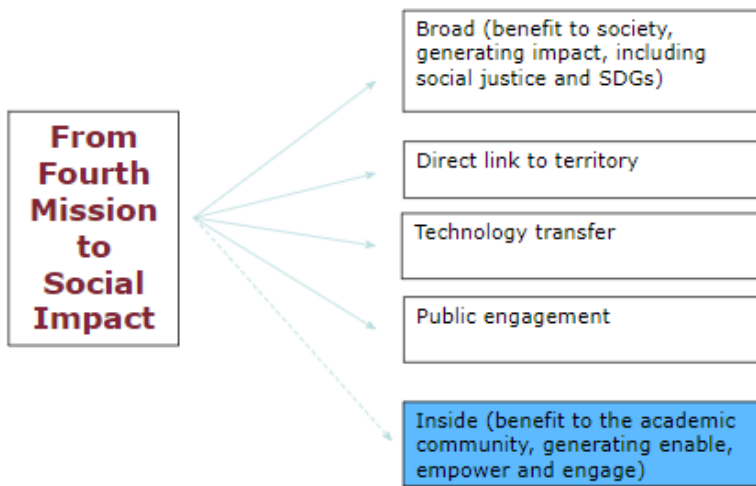


Illustration 1. Social mission in the Italian university system. Source: OECD 2024– processed by Authors.

University, society and the emerging missions: the experts’ vision

Different definitions and meanings are given to the social mission of universities, not only on the corporate websites of Italian universities, but also by the experts who were interviewed to discuss the results of the background analysis and to suggest how this same mission might evolve in the future.

The experts confirm the European definition of Fourth mission/social impact as the social valorisation of outcomes that academic teaching and research activities generate on several levels. Indeed, they understand the social

mission as being the long-term effect Universities produce on their surroundings: hence change at the local, national and global level. According to this perspective, universities are required to keep up with the global challenges of society, such as sustainable development, pandemics, artificial intelligence and the relative ethical implications. This definition is coherent with public evaluation policies in Italy that view the impact of university activities as coming under two distinct subcategories: those concerned with the economic and cultural valorisation of research products (Third mission) and those concerned with Fourth mission/social impact, where research involves interaction with the territory and generates outcomes of social value.

At the same time, the view held by experts is more consistent with the traditional notion that the social mission cannot be considered as a mission apart, but rather as mission-wide: a meta-mission, even if the ‘ordinal’ label of Fourth mission – now gaining currency in Italy, given that it follows on chronologically from the unfolding of the Third mission – suggests a residual and thus limited meaning.

As stated by one expert:

The Fourth mission is not autonomous, neither can it derive from a segmentation of the previous mission: it is, rather, a “meta-mission” (Pro-rector for the Fourth mission).

The convergence of the missions, often likened to the very expressive image of a multiple “helix” (Etzkowitz & Leydersdorff 1997; Etzkowitz et al. 2000), represents the most strategic approach that universities should proactively embrace to ensure a meaningful impact. According to the key experts:

The future is integration. University missions are called upon to collaborate and converge into a “multiple helix” (EUPRIO).

The university undergoes transformation alongside society (Rector).

Universities must heed the calls from society and from different stakeholders to engage in innovation through the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and ideas.

Moreover, in the view of the experts, the Fourth mission cannot be considered a real innovation, but rather a rediscovery of the potential of universities in the face of the great challenges presented by the contemporary world; as the interviews show, it implies first and foremost a new awareness and self-consciousness on the part of universities concerning the social role they can play in the community and in society at large:

The Fourth mission is, above all, the awareness by universities that they have a role to play in society (academic scholar).

Familiarity with the concept in Italy has been more recent, compared to Anglo-Saxon universities and a thirty-years-plus tradition in the field of outreach as the basis for investing in a more advanced idea of university impact, which has taken hold in Europe especially over this past decade.

According to the experts, Anglo-Saxon universities lead the sector (as do the polytechnic institutes in Italy) essentially because they are used to the idea of their relationship with the territory and with stakeholders being 'structural'. Indeed, unlike the Italian universities, which for the most part have their origins in political power, universities in the Anglo-Saxon system were created historically through private initiative and continue today, organically, to involve economic and business players in their strategic administration boards. As one academic scholar points out:

Anglo-Saxon universities lead the sector, first because their origins are private, whereas Italian universities are the creation of political powers: the Monarch, the Pope, the State (academic scholar).

Conversely, opportunities of this kind to involve the economic fabric of the country in the strategic decision-making of universities are very limited in Italy and restricted by law. In Italy, the relationship between universities and society in terms of social impact and environmental effects,

while becoming increasingly important, is driven by an overwhelming relationship with public institutions, local and national, on which Italian academic institutions depend for their funding and “licence to operate”. As stated by several interviewees:

In Italy, public institutions are becoming more and more conscious of the support universities can offer in solving problems, in an organised and stable relationship, and not only through the willingness of single members as in the past. This demand is really new (academic scholar).

In particular, the polytechnics are qualified, as institutes of technology, to contribute to society by focusing on social impact and sustainability. One interviewee remarked:

Certainly, the so-called “Third mission” has always been an essential pillar of the polytechnic vision. By way of example, the polytechnic University of Bari was established with a clear inclination towards this perspective and has consistently focused on it as a distinctive character trait, relying on Third mission principles to establish and strengthen its connection with the surrounding territorial context over time (Rector).

Over the past decade, evaluation policies and regulations within Italian universities have played a significant role in promoting the “new missions” at a normative level. The assessment of the “new missions” is in fact a key factor for Italian universities in obtaining a residual, but not insignificant quota of public funding (5%), distributed by the Italian evaluation agency ANVUR. Consequently, this attention has stimulated heightened focus and awareness among academic institutions. As one expert asserts:

The public evaluation system sparked a genuine movement in the university sphere to promote the Third mission and is now generating increased attention on Fourth mission/social impact (academic expert).

Furthermore, there is a “pandemic effect” to consider, as the spread of Covid-19 from March 2020 onwards greatly accelerated Fourth mission/social impact activity.

A study still in progress, developed during the lockdown period²³, shows a strong commitment by universities toward society. This sense of responsibility emerged quite naturally, as the reaction of an institution firmly embedded in the territory, like the university (APEnet).

As with other public and private organisations (Martino & Rossotti 2021), the emergency provided a unique opportunity for universities to empower and institutionalise both internal and community relationships, to look after and involve stakeholders affected by the pandemic, and especially those engaged most directly in the academic and local community. In the words of an expert:

The idea of social impact revolves, first of all, around the academic community, starting with equity and inclusion (Pro-rector for the Fourth mission).

The pandemic prompted a notable “digital acceleration”, resulting in an innovative opportunity to relate with new and diffuse targets worldwide: the relational model becomes global, but not altogether ‘boundaryless’, as one significant barrier remains, namely the language. Where the “new missions” are concerned — especially the social mission — the experts are insistent that the territory holds the key: the most strategic asset and platform, where universities are embedded, and a sort of “laboratory” where they can exercise and cultivate their “social capital”.

The pandemic has “forced” the relational attitude of the university. As some experts maintain:

The pandemic has forced the university to pursue new targets, previously unexplored and potentially boundaryless, thanks to digital technology. But a barrier still remains that of language (EUPRIO).

This is particularly evident in Italy, where the territory plays a decisive role in the distance between the North and the South of the country, as well as between the polytechnic and other kinds of universities, especially

23. For further information: <http://www.apenetwork.it/it/il-diario/societal-impact> (accessed July 31, 2023).

where there is significant demand from private players (and not only public institutions):

The awareness of the university as to its social role becomes stronger where there is strong local demand from private players (as in the case of polytechnics), and not only from public institutions (academic scholar).

The institutionalisation of the “new missions”, especially the social one, functions today as a multiplier of relationships between universities and their settings, internal and external. Indeed,

New missions multiply relationships. The “openness” required today of the university is not of the traditional kind (academic scholar).

The pandemic compelled the university to come out of its “comfort zone”. In the field of social impact, we have seen a great acceleration following the Covid-19 emergency (AICUN).

In this new scenario, relationships with stakeholders are shown finally to be a strategic asset for universities, having since their historic beginnings been an early example of “organisational” and “communicative networks”, based on weak ties and strongly value-driven (Mazzei 2000, 2004; Martino & Lombardi 2015). With the Covid-19 pandemic and digital acceleration, the relational model for universities appears to have become increasingly two-way, symmetrical (Grünig 2016): in effect, what was formerly a linear and somewhat “mechanical” transfer of knowledge driven by the university system has turned into a mutual exchange of objectives, methods and knowledge, to changing and improving all parties involved in the collaboration:

With the “Third mission”, the idea of a one-way conduit from university to society is left behind. Rather than a “transfer” toward the external environment, one is now seeing a new vision based on the mutual exchange of knowledge and a willingness to share objectives, methods, and results (Pro-rector for the Third mission).

When a university interacts with the territory, it must accept the challenge that it will not only influence and change its surroundings; it will also be influenced and changed by its surroundings (AICUN).

In this emerging perspective, Universities are called upon to discover the value of strategic relationships and real “partnerships”, based on dialogue and listening to stakeholders, as well as on concrete actions designed to achieve a set of common values and goals:

Impact needs strategic partnerships and the capacity for networking (ANVUR).

Build ecosystems of innovation in the local territory, work according to an approach of open innovation, support the development of innovative business: these are just some of the new activities the university can promote, in strong association with its traditional missions (CRUI).

From this standpoint, the “new missions”, especially the social one, implies a shift away from the traditional approach as it is about more than simply promoting a form of academic value, enhancing the university’s teaching and research activities through exploitation, dissemination and communication of their results. Even if public engagement activities (Scamuzzi & De Bortoli 2013) appear dominant in the vision of Italian universities, as documented by the most recent Anvur reports and evaluation campaigns, the communication of impact cannot be reduced merely to a follow-up activity, an attempt at better communication of existing academic activities. It deals rather with the assumption by universities of a wider “purpose” to do more, to generate a new kind of “benefit” and “shared value” based on quality relationships with all stakeholders:

The university of the Third Millennium is increasingly committed to value teaching and research in relationships with the territory, civic society and the business sector. It is a university projecting itself onto the environment. It does not restrict itself to its own primary field of interest but is willing to cultivate a virtuous “two-way” connection with

the outside world; to offer value, but also to “create” value by mutual interaction. It is a generative activity, which can also foster teaching and research activity (ANVUR).

According to the experts, the great challenge nowadays to improve the “new missions” is one of transforming university culture into a real strategy. On the one hand, in continuity with historic university tradition, impact highlights the nature of universities as real purpose-driven organisations (Atif 2019; Basu 2017; Rey et al. 2019), as well as their natural capacity for networking and communicating:

The new missions highlight the “genetic” propensity of universities for networking, engaging in relationships. With other players, as well as with other universities (AICUN).

Universities are called to be players in society not only in nominal terms, but also in terms of their corporate strategy (academic scholar).

On the other hand, strategic internal and external communication is presently transforming this special ethic and relational “talent” of the university into a corporate strategy, evolving in such a way as to assure quality, continuity and commitment to the interests of all stakeholders in a highly complex society, as well as allowing evaluation of the social processes and results promoted by universities. This would include, for example, evaluating the “new missions” in the context of a university’s strategic plans:

Leading change is never possible without communication. The strategic plans of universities cannot be considered only as administrative: they must also include the relevant actions of communication, and the processes – both inside and outside the academic community – needed to promote awareness and engagement with stakeholders (AICUN).

Undeniable difficulties remain in recognizing the value of the emerging missions and in institutionalising the relative processes within university policies. Looking to the future, the evaluation policies and system will continue to play a strategic role in engaging and rewarding the Italian academic

community as the “new missions” are developed, given how they can benefit the academic careers of scholars:

Evaluation can play a relevant role not only in rewarding best practices, but also in encouraging those universities that are in difficulties, and moreover, ultimately establishing the value of the “new missions” to academic careers (academic scholar).

There is limited scope for evaluation of this type currently in the Italian academic system, where the “new missions” tend still to be a residual and voluntary activity, often seen as a waste of time better employed in teaching and research. The interviewees state that:

Strategic objectives are not clear: the “new missions” are often perceived as a waste of time and effort, because they do not reward scholars and advance their careers (APEnet).

At the same time, the experts suggest that the most relevant challenge is more educational and cultural. Universities must make efforts to enable and empower their academic communities: on the one hand, in effect, the aim is to educate them in concretely leading and managing the “new missions”, organising their specific operational activities and applying a set of rules; on the other hand, it is to help, primarily, all internal stakeholders — scholars, personnel and also students — to recognize the great potential of the university, in the face of the many social challenges presented by the contemporary world:

Forging strategic relationships with the outside world means achieving effectiveness internally, at the level of the administrative and management machine, and requires a great effort to make people effective in an institution (AICUN).

The major challenge is to promote awareness inside universities. As the most recent national evaluation campaign demonstrates, Universities are not fully aware of their own potential (ANVUR).

From Impact to Value: discussion and final considerations

The findings of the study indicate that the social mission must be regarded as developing in continuity with the ancient university tradition (Haskins 1923; Ruegg 2004). This is to be understood as part of an evolving framework of relationships with society, including the local community and other non-academic stakeholders.

The socio-institutional relationships connecting universities with their surrounding communities and other stakeholders have been identified and evaluated in the past, and this continues today, especially in the areas of the third mission and public engagement.

Third mission relationships are those between universities and the wider society, and they have been the subject of much research (Blasi & Romagnosi 2014; Martino 2016; OECD 2023). Similarly, public engagement is a key area of interest, with a growing body of literature exploring the ways in which universities can engage with the public (Scamuzzi & De Bortoli 2013). In comparison to the Third Mission, the Fourth Mission/social impact assumes a more pronounced ethical significance, particularly considering the profound changes that have occurred in higher education institutions and society because of the pandemic emergency (Blasi 2023; Lovari 2022).

In the contemporary era, university setting is no longer simply a “place of learning” (Corsi & Magnier, 2016). It is a dynamic environment where the acquisition of knowledge is facilitated through the integration of traditional teaching and training activities with a surrounding hybrid media environment (including social media, blogs, forums, innovative tools such as podcasts, and platforms like Twitch). Consequently, contemporary universities have evolved into institutions that seek to educate informed and critical citizens, fostering engagement at both the national and global levels (Boffo & Moscati, 2015). Moreover, crises and changes have compelled academic institutions to invest in community relations (Burke 1999, Harrington 2018) and re-examine the relational model they are expected to cultivate with society. This entails defining their specific purpose and their responsibility

towards all stakeholders (Atif 2019; Basu, 2017; Rey et al., 2019), both within and outside the academic community, to address the novel challenges that arise from such relationships in an innovative manner.

Considering the evolving context, the results of the present exploratory study, interpreted in the framework of public and corporate communication, can offer suggestions and ideas at multiple levels. These include the specificities and trends that distinguish the Italian situation in the international scenario, the major illustrative variables influencing the development of social and impact-driven strategies carried out by universities in Italy, related to different regions and types of academic institutions, and the possible evolution and progressions of the phenomenon in the short to medium term. This is based on a strategic and “normative” vision as expressed by the experts interviewed.

The findings of the study demonstrate that Italian universities continue to adhere to regulations, definitions and cultural norms (Riviezzo et al., 2020), particularly in the context of the urgent response to the global pandemic and in the international environment, where universities in the Anglo-Saxon tradition are at the forefront of impact-driven initiatives. On the one hand, Italian experts describe this process of evolution and change in accordance with a highly specific “dictionary” that is characteristic of the university system. Conversely, their viewpoint suggests a strong connection between the advent of the “new missions” of universities and the strategic paradigm of relationship management and communication.

This interpretation is based on two fundamental concepts. Firstly, the implementation of a purpose-driven strategy is required to facilitate, empower and engage the academic community, encouraging it to transcend the conventional indicators associated with research and teaching performance. This should be done with a view to establishing mutual benefits and cultivating ‘shared value’ with the broader community and society, as explained by Porter and Kramer (2011). Secondly, the implementation of an advanced strategic-behavioural paradigm for the management of relations between

universities and stakeholders, as outlined by Grunig (2016). This approach is based on two-way symmetric communication and the formation of partnerships, accompanied by concrete actions aimed at advancing the interests of both parties involved in the relationship.

The experts' vision entails a potential transition from the official definition of "university impact," as outlined in European regulations, to a more relational and advanced conceptualization of "value." The former emphasises the ethical responsibility of universities for the changes they produce in their surrounding environments at local, national and global levels. In contrast, the latter advocates a more expansive and strategic investment by universities in relationships with stakeholders and with society, with the objective of generating long-term change and mutual benefits, and even enabling the achievement of social goals that might not be attainable by individual parties acting alone.

Indeed, the characteristics of strategic communication and PR theories explored in the current study suggest that the idea of impact, promoted by European regulations, was in certain aspects already outdated at its inception. This is because it appears to be based on a two-way but nonetheless asymmetric and university-centric model of relationship with stakeholders, in which there is only one active party (the university producing an impact), with the other party playing a passive role — that of a "context" or "target" for change seen purely as university-driven. In contrast to this predominantly unidirectional perspective, the social mission can be regarded as strategic when, over the medium to long term, it also generates 'rebound' effects that instigate change and innovation within the academic organisations themselves.

In this regard, the views of experts can inform future predictions regarding the evolution of the phenomenon. They can suggest potential directions for advancement, foreseeing a more advanced ethical and strategic vision based on the value of communication and relationships, and their institutionalisation by academic governance. A final research question that would

benefit from further scientific investigation is to ascertain what experiences and activities might result from this more progressive approach, as envisaged by experts, to guarantee the quality and efficacy of the social mission undertaken by universities in Italy and elsewhere.

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Acknowledgments

The Authors thank the following organisations for their help and cooperation:

AICUN – Italian Association of University Communicators, ANVUR - Italian Agency for the Evaluation of the Universities and Research Institutes, The Italian Network of Universities and Research Institutions for Public Engagement (APEnet), Italian Rectors' Conference (CRUI), Sapienza University of Rome, Italian University Network for Sustainable Development (RUS).

DECODING THE CSR COMMUNICATION PARADOX: STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

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Introduction

As the importance of sustainability continues to grow on the contemporary agenda, the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become an increasingly integral aspect of companies' strategic approach, influencing perceptions and fostering engagement with stakeholders. The modern concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) appears to be the result of the post-World War II era, a time marked by changes in social consciousness. During this period, citizens began demanding more from governments and companies in areas such as civil rights, women's rights, consumer rights, and environmental protection (Carroll, 2015). Furthermore, during this period (the 1960s and 1970s), various research endeavours commenced, examining the concept from a multitude of perspectives, including management, economics, ethics, sustainability, and so forth.

One of the more widely accepted definitions of CSR is that it is "the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organisations at a given point in time" (Carroll, 1979, p. 500). This definition is consistent with the Green Paper of the European

Commission (2001) and the United Nations Agenda 2030 (2015), which view companies as crucial agents for sustainable development, with a set of responsibilities that extend beyond their legal obligations. The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has gained significant traction globally and continues to be a subject of considerable academic interest. Despite the considerable body of research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the pervasive use of the term, there remains no consensus on its conceptualisation (Ihlen et al., 2011; Viererbl & Koch, 2022). Given the concept's intrinsic dependence on societal evolution and its situatedness within social, cultural, political, and economic contexts, there is a compelling case for sustained investigation to advance the development of consensus theories that can benefit both society and organisations.

From an academic standpoint, there has been a discernible surge in the number of academic publications on corporate social responsibility (CSR) since 2010. A search on ScienceDirect revealed a notable increase in the number of results related to CSR, from 1,702 in 2010 to 5,642 in 2022. A similar trend is observed in the ProQuest online library, where the number of results has increased significantly, from 61,750 in 2010 to 516,749 in 2022. At the macro-political level, entities such as the European Union and the United Nations have underscored the significance and influence of organisations in the realm of sustainable development. In the 2001 Green Paper, the European Commission advocates for corporate social responsibility and encourages the development of innovative practices, increased transparency, reliability of assessment and validation, and the creation of closer partnerships so that all stakeholders play an active role. In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015), the United Nations acknowledges the role of private sector companies, spanning microenterprises to multinational corporations, in the implementation of the Agenda, which comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (social, economic, and environmental).

At the corporate level, social responsibility is a topic that is currently receiving significant attention, driven by the various social and political pressures that have been previously mentioned. There is an increasing

societal and stakeholder expectation that organisations will act in a manner that benefits not only themselves but also society at large, particularly in regard to social and environmental matters (Viererbl & Koch, 2022). In order to fully realise the potential of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts, companies must engage in communication. Effective communication is essential for developing the requisite knowledge and motivation to engage all stakeholders in achieving sustainable development (UN, 2015).

Consequently, in recent decades, companies have augmented their social responsibility activities and, in turn, the communication of their CSR. In light of the growing informality and expectations of stakeholders, effective communication is crucial for informing and engaging with them, enhancing the company's reputation and performance, and increasing consumer intent and satisfaction (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Ihlen et al., 2011). Nevertheless, as Waddock and Googins (2011, p. 24) observe, "communicating about CSR often increases scepticism about the organisation, instead of achieving the intended goal of illustrating its contribution to society." The current climate is characterised by a pervasive atmosphere of mistrust, whereby stakeholders may perceive CSR communication as a mere public relations stunt, a marketing ploy, an instrument of maintaining the status quo, or even greenwashing (Ihlen et al., 2011; Viererbl & Koch, 2022). Nevertheless, consumer opinion polls indicate that the business sector is regarded as playing a pivotal role in addressing societal challenges (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Waddock & Googins, 2011). This phenomenon gives rise to a paradox that presents a significant challenge for those engaged in communication-related roles. It is incumbent upon companies to disseminate information regarding their social responsibility initiatives in order to apprise all stakeholders of their contributions to society. It is only through communication that collaborative efforts between citizens, government, and the business sector for sustainable development can be achieved, as set out in the United Nations Agenda 2030. Nevertheless, studies have demonstrated that extensive communication can result in adverse outcomes for companies (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Waddock & Googins, 2011; Morsing,

Schultz & Nielsen, 2008). Consequently, it is crucial for organisations to comprehend how their communication of social responsibility activities is perceived and to identify the optimal strategies, tools and scope to achieve the most favourable outcomes for both the company and its stakeholders. Despite the paradoxical effects of CSR communication being the subject of study in various research (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Howaniec & Kasinski, 2021; Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2016; Waddock & Googins, 2011; Du et al., 2010; Morsing, Schultz & Nielsen, 2008), the literature review reveals that there are more studies on the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility itself. This is because there is still little academic consensus on its meaning.

In conclusion, it is pertinent to investigate the field of Corporate Social Responsibility Communication, as it: Firstly, it is a subject that is currently on the social and political agenda. Secondly, it is an area that requires continuous updating due to the constant social and political changes. Thirdly, there are few studies that focus on CSR communication and that offer concrete directions for effective communication strategies.

Literature Review

The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has a long historical trajectory, with traces of social concerns in ancient Roman laws (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019). However, the modern concept of CSR is considered a product of the 20th century, particularly the last 70 years, stemming from notions of organisational philanthropy and corporate responses to various social and political pressures that emerged, primarily, after World War II (Carroll, 2021; Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019; Ihlen et al., 2011).

Definition of Corporate Social Responsibility

At the end of the 1970s, marked by transformations in organizations in response to societal demands that began in the previous decade, Archie B. Carroll proposed a more unified definition of CSR than had existed to that point (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019). Carroll defined Corporate Social

Responsibility as “the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time” (Carroll, 1979, p. 500).

Around the turn of the millennium, there was increasing global recognition of the importance of CSR. In 2001, the European Commission presented the “Green Paper - Promoting a European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility,” which provided an approach to corporate social responsibility in both a European and international context. The Green Paper argued that being socially responsible “is not confined to compliance with all legal obligations—it involves going beyond ‘additional’ investment in human capital, the environment, and relations with other stakeholders and local communities” (European Commission, 2001, p. 7).

In 2015, the Paris Agreement was adopted, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was launched, which included the adoption of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019). Although the SDGs do not specifically impose commitments on the business sector, they address various dimensions of sustainable development (social, economic, and environmental) and call for “worldwide action by governments, businesses, and civil society to eradicate poverty and create lives of dignity and opportunity for all within the planet’s limits” (BCSD Portugal, 2022).

This political context fostered the growth of CSR studies, as companies saw CSR as a strategic framework aimed at creating shared value, as encouraged by the SDGs. There has also been a notable expansion in academic literature. Recent publications since 2015 have focused on the implementation of CSR and its impact on specific areas related to the SDGs but have not necessarily contributed to the definition or evolution of the concept of CSR (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019).

Corporate Social Responsibility Communication

In recent decades, with the increasing expectations and demands of stakeholders, the way organizations communicate their CSR to their audiences has become a subject of extensive research. This academic interest has led to a growing body of multidisciplinary literature with the general aim of “understanding the role of different types of communication between companies and their stakeholders in shaping meanings, expectations, and CSR practices” (Crane & Glozer, 2016).

Podnar (2008) defines CSR communication as “a process of anticipating stakeholder expectations, articulating CSR policies, and managing various communication tools within an organization aimed at providing true and transparent information about the integrity of a company or brand in its business operations, social and environmental concerns, and interactions with stakeholders” (Podnar 2008, p. 75).

Bachmann and Inghoff (2016), drawing on Carroll’s (1991) CSR definition and complementary concepts, define CSR communication as specific and mediated reports between companies and stakeholders regarding the obligations of the company. These obligations are based on societal standards and expectations that go beyond profitability and legal requirements, such as achieving social, political, and cultural benefits and maintaining or improving environmental quality. CSR communication occurs in social interactions between organisational members and individual members of the public. The former includes individuals authorized to represent the company, such as CEOs, public relations professionals, or CSR consultants (Bachmann and Inghoff, 2016).

More recently, Viererbl and Koch (2022) offer a concise definition of CSR communication as “any corporate communication that addresses an organization’s CSR efforts and/or related processes” (p. 2). As mentioned by Viererbl and Koch, CSR communication can be integrated into a company’s Corporate Communication, which can be characterized as “a management function responsible for overseeing and coordinating the work performed

by communication professionals in various specialized disciplines, such as media relations, public affairs, and internal communication” (Cornelissen, 2011, p. 5).

However, other scholars study CSR communication within the context of Management Communication. This form of communication consists of managers communicating with internal and external target groups and is considered essential for maintaining the company’s reputation and a positive internal culture (van Riel, 1995). In this regard, CSR communication within the framework of Management Communication presents a more functionalist definition, focusing on enhancing corporate image and reputation among internal and external stakeholders (Nielsen & Thomsen, 2012).

From another perspective, CSR communication can be viewed as an integral part of Marketing Communication, which encompasses direct communication to support sales with the aim of influencing consumers and boosting sales (van Riel, 1995). In this approach, CSR is seen as a tool to improve consumers’ perception of a company’s products (Nielsen & Thomsen, 2012). The use of CSR as a marketing tool has been closely associated with studies related to the “green” movement that began in the 1980s, where brands started offering more environmentally conscious products. However, many of these studies also show that using CSR as a marketing tool generates skepticism and distrust among consumers.

Therefore, many authors believe that there is no unified CSR literature but rather a heterogeneous body of research that covers various areas of management studies. “This plurality means that even basic questions such as ‘what is the purpose of CSR communication’ remain unanswered” (Crane & Glozer, 2016, p. 1224).

However, some authors have made significant contributions to the field of CSR communication. Notably, Ihlen et al. (2011) and Mette Morsing (2006) have provided valuable insights into CSR communication. Morsing’s work, “Strategic CSR Communication” (2006), introduced a perspective on CSR communication through the lens of a strategic stakeholder group

(consumers, NGOs, employees, investors, etc.). In 2006, Morsing collaborated with Majken Schultz to develop a model of three CSR communication strategies, a highly significant contribution to communication professionals, which will be discussed further in this study.

Ihlen, Bartlett and May (2011) published one of the most comprehensive works on CSR communication, titled “The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Social Responsibility” (2011). The book covers different perspectives on CSR communication, including management communication, organisational communication, marketing communication, and public relations. Additionally, May authored “Corporate Social Responsibility: Virtue or Vice?” in 2011, providing valuable insights into the paradox of CSR communication.

Effects and Challenges of Communicating CSR: The CSR Paradox

The importance of communicating CSR is undeniable and widely accepted by the academic community. Communicating CSR efforts can contribute to the creation of positive perceptions and opinions about the organization. It can help build legitimacy, support the development of trust relationships with stakeholders, communicate the abstract and intangible characteristics of the organization, and provide truthful and transparent information to increasingly demanding and engaged stakeholders (Viererbl & Kosh, 2022; Crane & Glozer, 2016).

However, studies also show that this type of communication can result in skepticism and distrust among stakeholders. In this context of lack of trust, communicating CSR is complicated and creates a paradoxical dilemma: organizations want to respond to the growing demands for accountability and transparency from the public, but they also experience negative effects with increased CSR communication (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2016; Waddock & Googins, 2011; Ihlen, et al., 2011; Du et al., 2010).

So, how to communicate Corporate Social Responsibility to combat the effects of the CSR paradox? There is a wealth of research on this topic, where authors have pointed out some of the most important factors that influence the effects of CSR on stakeholders: the type of industry, the extent of communication, the perceived motives of the company by consumers (intrinsic vs. extrinsic), the content of the message, and the communication channels used (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2016; Du et al., 2010).

Regarding the extent of CSR communication, as mentioned earlier, studies confirm that the more a company communicates its CSR activities, the more negative effects it will have on stakeholders (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Eisenegger & Schranz, 2011). However, it is impossible to define an exact value of CSR communication for a company to achieve positive results. Instead, the extent should be proportional to the actual CSR activities carried out by the organization. To explain this theory, Viererbl and Koch (2022) propose a matrix of the relationship between the quantity of CSR communication and CSR activities of companies.

According to this matrix, there are four possible pairs of CSR activities-communication: 1) CSR Omitting, when a company is not engaged in CSR activities and CSR communication, resulting in either no effect or negative effects on the public perception of the company; 2) CSR Washing, when there is a lot of CSR communication but the organization has little actual CSR activity; 3) CSR Blushing, when a large number of CSR activities are not communicated to stakeholders, having no impact on public perceptions of the company; 4) finally, CSR Committing, when a company is highly engaged in CSR activities and communicates them frequently and extensively. This last situation is considered ideal by the authors, “as the organization’s CSR efforts not only benefit society but, through proper communication, also affect stakeholders’ perception of the organization as responsible, which can result in a more positive reputation” (Viererbl & Koch, 2022, p. 3).

Bachmann and Ingenhoff (2016) also studied the CSR paradox, which they called “dilemma”, and postulated a model that summarizes the

relation between the Extent of CSR Disclosure, a main factor also studied by Viererbl and Koch (2022), to other factors such as Perceived Persuasion Intent, Psychological Reactance, Content Credibility and Corporate Legitimacy. In their study, the extent of CSR communication has a positive effect on Corporate Legitimacy, Content Credibility and a negative effect on Perceived Persuasion Intent. This last factor has a positive effect on Psychological Reactance against the company, which afterwards negatively affects Content Credibility and Corporate Legitimacy.

In addition to the extent, several studies address the issue of stakeholders' perception of a company's motives. Du et al. (2010) identify two types of CSR motives: extrinsic, when a company's CSR is seen as an attempt to increase its profits, or intrinsic, in which a company's CSR is viewed as a genuine concern for the focal issue. Therefore, when stakeholders identify intrinsic motives, it leads to the formation of positive inferences about the company's character, resulting in a positive response. Conversely, perceptions of extrinsic motives by stakeholders lead to a less favorable attitude toward the company (Du et al., 2010). It is also understood that this analysis is related to the matrix presented by Viererbl and Koch (2022), as the perceived motives of stakeholders will depend on the communication and CSR activities carried out by companies.

Du et al. (2010) also present a conceptual framework for CSR communication, which identifies some of the most important aspects of CSR communication, such as message content, communication channels, and specific factors related to the company and stakeholders that influence CSR effectiveness. This summary framework can be a valuable resource for the current research as a context for the application of the chosen research instruments.

At the strategic level of establishing the organization's relationship with its stakeholders, Morsing and Schultz (2006) propose, based on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) Public Relations model, three CSR communication strategies: Stakeholder Information Strategy, Stakeholder Response Strategy

and Stakeholder Involvement Strategy. The last approach is considered the most interesting and beneficial, both for the company and stakeholders as “stakeholders need to be involved to develop and promote positive support, and for the company to understand and simultaneously adapt to their concerns, i.e., to develop its CSR initiatives” (Morsing & Schultz, 2006, p. 328). It involves symmetrical bilateral communication, representing a joint construction of CSR through dialogue between the company and its stakeholders.

Methodology

The present research focuses on the communication of CSR, more precisely on the paradox of communicating a company’s social responsibility efforts. In recent decades, companies have intensified their CSR activities and, consequently, the communication of their CSR to achieve the best results for both the company and society. However, CSR communication often leads to negative effects for the organization due to skepticism and lack of trust from stakeholders.

Therefore, it is important to investigate how CSR is perceived by stakeholders and which strategies, tools and extent of communication are most suitable for companies to achieve the best results. With the research object defined, it is possible to establish the research problem: should companies communicate their CSR efforts? And if so, what are the best practices for doing so?

As aforementioned, CSR studies are mostly focused on the concept definition. However, some researchers have started to study the paradoxical phenomenon of communicating CSR. To choose the methodology for this investigation, some of the most relevant papers on CSR Communication were analyzed, as shown in Table 1. In terms of research techniques, a trend can be identified: exploratory studies of CSR communication focusing on its application by companies tend to use qualitative methodologies like literature research; causal studies focusing on consumer perception

tend to use a quantitative methodology with the use of questionnaires. On the other hand, investigations focusing on both consumers and companies tend to use a mixed methodology with both qualitative and quantitative research techniques.

Table 1. Studies on CSR communication and its research methodologies and techniques.

Authors	Year	Article	Methodology / Research Techniques
Viererbl & Koch	2022	The paradoxical effects of communicating CSR activities: Why does CSR communication has both positive and negative effects on the perception of a company's social responsibility?	Quantitative methodology: Consumer questionnaire (2x2 between-subjects design)
Howaniec & Kasinski	2021	How To Communicate CSR Activities? Should Companies Communicate Their Social Commitment?	Mixed methodology: Structured interview with a company representative and an online questionnaire for residents of the city where the company operates.
Lock & Schulz-Knappe	2018	Credible corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication predicts legitimacy: evidence from and experimental study	Quantitative methodology: Consumer questionnaire (2x2 between-subjects design)
Crane & Glozer	2016	Researching Corporate Social Responsibility Communication: Themes, Opportunities and Challenges	Qualitative Methodology: Literature Review
Bachmann & Ingenhoff	2016	Legitimacy through CSR disclosures? The advantage outweighs the disadvantages	Quantitative Methodology: Consumer Questionnaire (Single-Factor Between-Groups Design)

Morsing & Schultz	2014	The 'Catch 22' of communicating CSR: Findings from a Danish study	Mixed Methodology: Online or Telephone Questionnaire to Danish Residents Regarding the Reputation of Danish Companies, and Case Study of Two Danish Companies
Ingenhoff & Sommer	2011	Corporate Social Responsibility Communication - A multi-method approach on stakeholder expectations and managers' intentions	Mixed Methodology: Content analysis of sustainability reports, interviews with company executives, and a questionnaire for potential stakeholders.
Du, Bhattacharya & Sen	2010	Maximizing Business Returns to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): The role of CSR Communication	Qualitative Methodology: Literature Review
Nielson & Thomsen	2009	CSR communication in small and medium-sized enterprises: a study of the attitudes and beliefs of middle managers	Qualitative Methodology: Semi-structured in-depth interviews

To gain an in-depth understanding of companies' intentions, strategies, and tools for CSR communication, a qualitative methodology is typically used, often involving literature reviews, interviews, or case studies. In studies aiming to measure the impact of CSR communication on consumers and collect their associations and perceptions, a quantitative methodology is commonly employed, primarily utilizing questionnaires. This analysis provides a solid framework for defining a coherent and effective methodology for the present study.

In the CSR communication phenomenon, consumers fall within the realm of perception, while organizations operate within the realm of intention. Thus, to address the defined research problem, it is considered relevant to analyze the perspectives of both consumers and companies comprehensively, in order to fully grasp how CSR communication should be approached for the benefit of both organizations and society.

Taking this into consideration, along with the research problem and the perspectives to be analyzed (stakeholders and companies), the use of a mixed methodology is deemed pertinent in this research. Mixed methodology

refers to the process of linking qualitative and quantitative elements to achieve a more comprehensive answer to the research question (Zhang & Creswell, 2013).

By using this combination of methods, mixed methodology research “capitalizes on the strengths of qualitative and quantitative research, while mitigating their weaknesses to provide a comprehensive and integrated understanding of the topic under investigation” (Halcomb & Hickman, 2015, p. 3). There are numerous reasons to adopt a mixed methodology, such as corroboration, complementarity, development, initiation, and expansion (Halcomb & Hickman, 2015). In the case of this study, the complementarity of results and the expansion of the depth and scope of the research are the main reasons for adopting this mixed methodology.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

Two research instruments were selected: interviews with representatives or communication professionals from selected companies in the GRACE network, and a questionnaire aimed at consumers living in Portugal. It is important to note that this will be a cross-sectional study, where data will be collected at a specific point in time and only once.

Firstly, a questionnaire was conducted on Google Forms and distributed online. To create the questionnaire, studies presented in the literature review were analyzed to understand what questions are typically posed to consumers in this type of research (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2016; Ingenhoff & Sommer, 2011). It was deemed relevant to conduct a 2x2 between-subjects design survey. In this survey, two of the main influencing factors on the success of CSR communication identified in the exploratory research are manipulated: communication extent (Factor 1: low vs. high extent of CSR communication) and industry type (Factor 2: trusted vs. untrusted industries).

The surveys were designed so that participants had to read an “About Us” text from a fictitious company’s website, which provides information about

its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The texts of the companies were constructed using Artificial Intelligence tools, based on other real texts already present on the internet. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions:

Scenario A: Limited extent of communication of CSR activities of a fictitious company in an industry with a low reputation. The energy sector was chosen, and the fictitious company “PowerFuel. Solutions” was created, as it is considered the most polluting industry (Climaximo & Greve Climática Estudantil Portugal, 2021).

Scenario B: High extent of communication about CSR activities of the same fictitious company in the energy sector (PowerFuel. Solutions).

Scenario C: Limited extent of communication of CSR activities of a fictitious company in an industry with fewer reputation problems, such as the food sector. The fictitious company “Unity Foods” was created.

Scenario D: High extent of communication of CSR activities of the fictitious company in the food sector (Unity Foods).

In each experimental condition, using a five-point Likert scale (completely disagree-completely agree), we aimed to understand the effect of the presented texts on consumers’ perception of the company. Factors identified in the Literature Review were measured, such as perceived persuasive intent, psychological reactance, perception of social responsibility, perception of the amount of CSR-related communication, corporate legitimacy, and content credibility (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2016).

The population for this research instrument is consumers residing in Portugal, i.e., those who have greater access to CSR actions by companies operating in Portugal. Within this population, a non-probabilistic convenience and snowball sampling method was employed. The data obtained was then analyzed within the Google Forms platform and with the assistance of Excel.

Secondly, it was considered pertinent to conduct individual semi-structured interviews, in writing (via email) or face-to-face (video call). A semi-structured interview combines closed and open-ended questions, meaning there is a set of questions that serve as a guide, but the interviewee has the freedom to speak freely on some of the questions. This allowed for more in-depth responses and reflections (Minayo, 2010).

The population was defined as companies belonging to the GRACE network - Responsible Companies, a non-profit business association that operates in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability. Founded in 2000 to respond to the current needs and evolution of CSR, “GRACE is a platform for sharing and supporting companies in structuring their CSR and Sustainability policies, while simultaneously being an influencer of public policies and national and international trends” (GRACE, 2023).

To analyze and understand the objectives, strategies and tools of CSR communication in companies, it is necessary to study companies that actually engage in CSR activities and communicate them, specifically in Portugal. Choosing the GRACE network as the population allowed to segment the universe of organizations with activity in Portugal, ensuring that companies that intend to be socially responsible and demonstrate it only were investigated.

Thus, and in order to have a diversified sample, from the 270 companies associated with GRACE, 20 companies were selected through a non-probabilistic convenience sampling process, representing different sectors of activity and different levels of reputation (Food Industry; Electricity, Gas, and Water; Wholesale or Retail Trade; Financial and Insurance Activities; and Transportation Sector). The selected companies also had to present their CSR efforts on their communication channels (website and/or social media).

To conduct the interviews, representatives of the selected companies were contacted and invited to participate in the research. Simultaneously, an interview guide was developed to guide the interviews toward the most relevant questions for the research topic: main objectives of the company’s

CSR communication, major challenges, preferred communication channels, success factors, and the importance of CSR within the company's strategy and future (Howaniec & Kasinski, 2021; Ingenhoff & Sommer, 2011; Nielson & Thomsen, 2009).

Once the companies had confirmed their participation, interviews with their representatives were scheduled. The interviews were recorded for later transcription and analysis in the context of the research topic and problem. In the end, after analyzing the results obtained in interviews and the questionnaire, a triangulation process was conducted to cross-reference evidence to the information collected in the literature review. The aim, as aforementioned, was to produce a set of guidelines on how to communicate CSR, considering the perspectives of companies, consumers, and researchers in the field.

Description and Analysis of Results

Interviews to Companies

As aforementioned, 20 companies were contacted, and they were invited to respond to the questions outlined above. Responses were received from 6 companies representing 3 sectors of activity: two organizations in Financial and Insurance Activities - BPI and Fidelidade; two companies in the Energy, Electricity, and Gas sector - GALP and EDP; and two companies in the Food Industry and Wholesale or Retail Trade - Delta and Auchan Retail Portugal.

The interviewed companies, despite operating in different sectors, share numerous similarities. Firstly, they are large organizations with high annual revenues and a number of employees ranging from two thousand to nine thousand. In addition to these corporate characteristics, all six companies have very similar views on the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and its communication, which is expected as they all belong to the previously mentioned GRACE network.

In terms of objectives and reasons for communicating their CSR, there was a common recognition of the impact and responsibility that companies have towards society, with CSR serving as a way to offset the impact of the organization's activities on communities and the planet. Additionally, attracting and retaining talent and creating and maintaining relationships with communities are other reasons cited by the interviewed companies. Overall, there appears to be a concern for sustainability and the future of the company, which depends on the sustainability and future of society.

Regarding the challenges of communicating their CSR efforts, the main concern of the company representatives is consumer perception regarding the extent and motives of CSR. In other words, companies are concerned about striking a balance between actions and communication to create a positive organic reputation. Ensuring that all stakeholders understand the company's purpose and creating innovative, differentiated initiatives and projects that stand out in the community were other challenges mentioned by the interviewees.

All interviewed companies mention transparency as one of the key factors for effectively communicating CSR. Another frequently mentioned success factor is authenticity, i.e., consistency between the company's purpose, values, and internal culture with the communicated CSR efforts. This will allow the organization to reduce levels of skepticism from the public. Company representatives also emphasized the importance of engaging with all stakeholders, and this communication should be regular, not just during "good times".

From the interview analysis, it also appears that official, formal, and institutional communication channels of the company itself and channels related to the communities and stakeholders involved in the initiatives are favored for communicating CSR efforts. Additionally, the CSR Communication of the six interviewed companies is always located within a department related to External and/or Internal Communication of the organization. However, three out of the six companies mentioned the need to treat CSR

in a holistic manner, integrated into the overall communication, marketing, and management strategy of the entire organization.

Questionnaire to Consumers

From the sample collected (N=343), the majority of respondents are female (81,6%; N=280). Regarding age, 28,3% (N=97) of individuals are from Generation Z (between 18 and 25 years old), 57,1% (N=196) are between 26 and 45 years old (Generation Y), and 14% (N=48) are between 46 and 65 years old (Generation X). Therefore, most of the interviewees are primarily from the younger generations Z and Y (Beresford Research, 2022).

In terms of occupation, the majority of individuals are employed (72%; N=247), with a significant percentage of students (17,2%; N=59) and working students (9,3%; N=32). Regarding their level of education, individuals with higher education predominate (84,5%; N=290), including those with a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree. Regarding monthly personal income (net), 72,6% of respondents (N=249) have an income higher than the Portuguese minimum wage - 760€ (PORDATA, 2023).

Finally, when asked if they were familiar with the concept of Social Responsibility, the majority of respondents (61,2%; N= 210) responded positively. Additionally, 67,6% of consumers showed some degree of interest and recognition for Social Responsibility communication (“Yes, I am quite interested” and “I sometimes come across this type of communication”).

With the described sample, the results of the four different scenarios presented in the questionnaire will be analyzed, summarized in Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5. It is important to note that the number of responses in each scenario was not balanced, and the number of respondents is indicated in the respective tables. Therefore, for a more accurate analysis, percentage values will be analyzed rather than response frequencies.

Table 2. Results of Scenario A from the Questionnaire.

Scenery A: PowerFuel. Solutions - Low Extent (N=130; 37,9%)				
Factors	Agree or Totally Agree		Disagree or Totally Disagree	
	Average Frequency	%	Average Frequency	%
Perception of Persuasive Intent of the Company	105,33	81,03	10,33	7,95
Psychological Reactance Against the Company	67,50	51,92	29,50	22,69
Positive Perception of the Company's Social Responsibility	29,50	22,69	62,00	47,69
Corporate legitimacy and Content Credibility	33,33	25,64	60,33	46,41

In an industry with a worst reputation, such as the Energy Sector, a low extent of CSR Communication appears to lead to a very high consumer's perception of persuasive intent (81,03% of respondents) and also psychological reactance against the company (51,92%). The results also indicate that it can lead to some negative perceptions of the company's social responsibility efforts and its legitimacy and credibility. As we can see in Table 5, few respondents answered "Agree" or "Totally Agree" to the questions that assessed these factors.

Table 3. Results of Scenario B from the Questionnaire.

Scenery B: PowerFuel. Solutions - High Extent (N=75; 21,9%)				
Factors	Agree or Totally Agree		Disagree or Totally Disagree	
	Average Frequency	%	Average Frequency	%
Perception of Persuasive Intent of the Company	57,00	76,00	9,00	2,62
Psychological Reactance Against the Company	28,00	37,33	26,00	7,58
Positive Perception of the Company's Social Responsibility	33,00	44,00	24,00	32,00
Corporate legitimacy and Content Credibility	32,00	42,67	26,67	35,56

When studying the same company, a high extent of CSR Communication appears to lead to a small decrease of consumer's perception of persuasive intent than a low extent CSR communication (76% compared to 81,03%) and a bigger decrease on the psychological reactance against the company (37,33% comparing to 51,92%). Also, the results indicate that a higher extent of communication helped consumers to have a more positive perception of the company's social responsibility and its corporate legitimacy and credibility.

In summary, a higher extent seems to be important to explain with more detail the CSR efforts of a company with lower levels of reputation, leading to more credibility and legitimacy. And even though the consumers may see this higher extent communication as more persuasive, it appears to be in a not so negative way, because we can see more positive results in consumers' perception of the company's CSR efforts.

Table 4. Results of Scenario C from the Questionnaire.

Scenery C: Unity Foods - Low Extent (N=92; 26,8%)				
Factors	Agree or Totally Agree		Disagree or Totally Disagree	
	Average Frequency	%	Average Frequency	%
Perception of Persuasive Intent of the Company	67,00	72,83	15,00	16,30
Psychological Reactance Against the Company	22,00	23,91	41,00	44,57
Positive Perception of the Company's Social Responsibility	55,00	59,78	17,00	18,48
Corporate legitimacy and Content Credibility	50,33	54,71	21,00	22,83

In this case, a low extent of communication appears to also lead to a high perception of persuasive intent by the respondents (72,83%). However, even though there's this recognition of persuasive intent, it appears to not originate psychological reactance and to not affect the positive perception of the CSR efforts of the company and corporate legitimacy and credibility.

Table 5. Results of Scenario D from the Questionnaire.

Scenery D - High Extent (N=46;13,4%)				
Factors	Agree or Totally Agree		Disagree or Totally Disagree	
	Average Frequency	%	Average Frequency	%
Perception of Persuasive Intent of the Company	39,67	86,23	2,67	5,80
Psychological Reactance Against the Company	10,50	22,83	24,50	53,26
Positive Perception of the Company's Social Responsibility	33,00	71,74	4,50	9,78
Corporate legitimacy and Content Credibility	30,33	65,94	6,33	13,77

A higher extent of communication by the same company, appears to lead to an even higher perception of persuasive intent by the respondents (86,23%). However, even though there's this recognition of persuasive intent, it appears to create even more positive results on the other factors such as psychological reactance (decreases), perception of legitimacy and credibility and positive perception of the CSR efforts of the company (increases).

We can see that, when comparing the results between low and high extent of CSR communication of the Food Company, there isn't as big of a difference as the comparison between the sceneries of the Energy Company. A higher extent of communication seems to help corporate legitimacy and credibility, the consumers' perception of the CSR and to reduce the reactance against the company. With higher extent of communication respondents identify a bigger persuasive intent of the company. But when connecting all these results, the persuasive intent identified by the consumers doesn't seem to prevent them from acknowledging the CSR efforts of the company.

Discussion

Firstly, according to the literature review, there is a consensus among researchers regarding the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication. On one hand, with increasing social and political pressure, companies need to communicate their efforts to demonstrate an awareness

of their significance in society, reduce the impact of their activities on society, and thus contribute to sustainable development. On the other hand, and consequently, communicating their CSR efforts contributes to creating positive perceptions and trust relationships with the company's stakeholders (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Crane & Glozer, 2016; Ihlen et al., 2011).

This recognition of the importance of CSR and its communication is also evident in the questionnaire and interview results. In the conducted survey, the majority of respondents were familiar with the concept of CSR, and 67.6% showed some degree of interest and recognition for CSR communication, citing 152 brands or CSR campaigns they remembered encountering recently.

In the interviews, all the companies, despite being previously selected for already investing in the communication of their CSR efforts, pointed out various reasons for their strong inclination toward Social Responsibility as an integral part of their business management strategy. All the companies acknowledge their responsibility to society, as they are actors with an impact on society. As EDP mentions, profit and purpose (CSR) always go “hand in hand,” and this is how the sustainability of the company is ensured. As the representative from BPI stated, “communication is necessary for the public to know the company's purpose.”

According to the culture, mission, and values of the interviewed companies, CSR communication is essential to ensure a sustainable future for organizations and to maintain relationships with their stakeholders. Therefore, answering the first part of the research question, it is important to communicate a company's CSR efforts because it can benefit not only the company itself but society as a whole.

However, this communication presents some challenges, pointed out by researchers and the interviewed companies, that are related to the previous explained CSR Communication Paradox. Thus, how can this communication be done to maximize these benefits and address the paradoxical phenomenon of CSR communication?

Through the literature research it was possible to identify some of the factors that investigators believe influence stakeholders' perception and acceptance of CSR Communication. Understanding and strategizing these factors will help companies combat the CRSC paradox: 1) Type of industry (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Aqueveque, C. et al., 2018) - if stakeholders perceive an industry as negative or untrustworthy, CSR efforts will hardly contribute to more positive perceptions; 2) Communication Extent (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Waddock & Googins, 2011; Morsing, et. al, 2008) - several studies have concluded that a large extent of communication can lead to negative consequences for companies (see Viererbl & Koch's model); Motives perceived by stakeholders (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Du et al., 2010) - when stakeholders identify intrinsic reasons, this leads to a positive reaction about the company's character. On the contrary, perceptions of extrinsic motives by stakeholders lead to a more negative attitude towards the company; Stakeholders' participation (Morsing & Schultz, 2006) - a joint construction of the CSR communication through dialogue between the company and its stakeholders is the most interesting and beneficial for both parts; Message Content and Communication Channels (Du et al., 2010) - importance of internal, corporate and independent channels to create better results.

Some of these factors are also mentioned by the representatives of the interviewed companies. The concern for a balance between CSR actions and their communication (communication extent); transparency, genuineness, and coherence between the company's purpose and its actions (which influence consumers' perceived motives); and engagement and regular communication with all stakeholders (internal and external), which, according to Morsing & Schultz (2006), results in a joint value creation that benefits the company, consumers, the community, and society as a whole.

In terms of communication channels, the interview results also align with the ideas presented by Du et al. (2010). Regarding external channels, there is a greater emphasis on institutional websites, sustainability reports, press releases, and, especially, a focus on communication through partners'

channels to lend greater credibility and authenticity to the company's CSR efforts.

Both the literature review (Du et al., 2010) and the interviews emphasize the importance of internal channels, such as internal websites, newsletters, email, workshops, etc. In the interviews, it becomes even more apparent how much importance these organizations attribute to internal stakeholders. Specifically, BPI, Fidelidade, Delta, and Auchan Retail Portugal mention that a company's Social Responsibility must stem from the creation of an internal culture, with a purpose and values that will then guide the company's CSR efforts. Additionally, for these organizations, employees are seen as brand ambassadors. Therefore, they should be the first to be informed and should be invited to participate in the creation process of the company's CSR strategy. This demonstrates the importance of Internal Communication and its connection to Corporate and Social Responsibility Communication.

Now focusing on the questionnaire, it allowed the study of the relationship between two main factors mentioned in the literature review - communication extent and company reputation. The results may help companies understand how the extent of communication of their CSR efforts affects consumers' perception, considering the reputation of their industry.

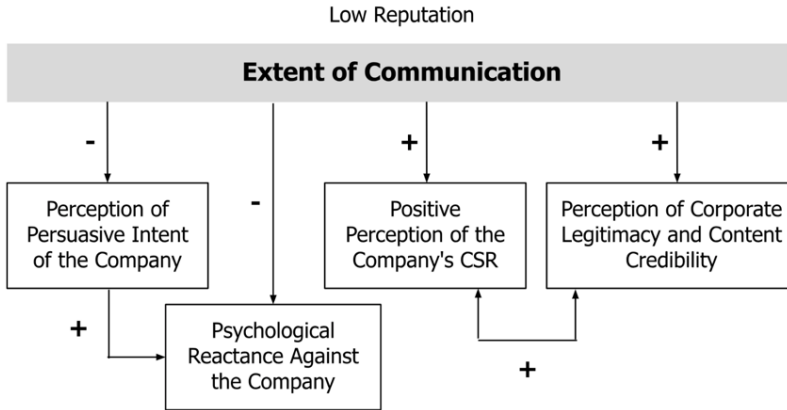


Illustration 1. Conceptual model of the relationship between the extent of CSR communication and the various factors studied in the questionnaire in a low reputation industry.

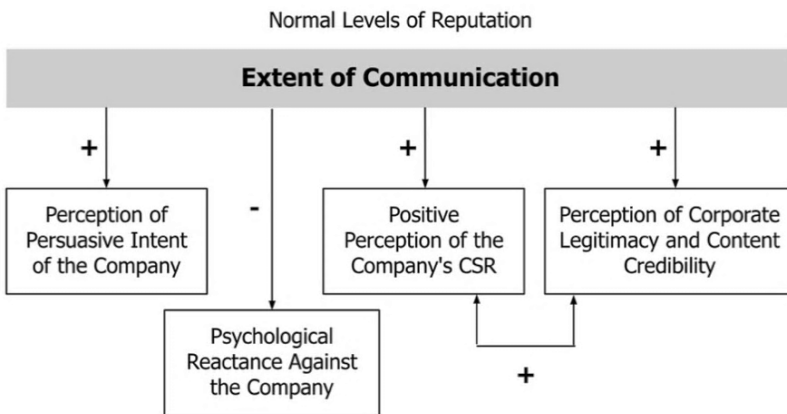


Illustration 2. Conceptual model of the relationship between the extent of CSR communication and the various factors studied in the questionnaire in a normal reputation industry.

Illustrations 1 and 2 are a proposal of two models that summarize the results obtained in the conducted questionnaire. When a company operates in an industry with reputation problems, increasing the extent of CSR communication reduces the perception of persuasive intent and also

reduces psychological reactance against the company, while also enhancing the positive perception of the company's CSR efforts and its legitimacy and credibility.

In the case of a company in an industry with normal or higher levels of reputation, increasing the extent of CSR communication, despite reducing psychological reactance against the company, increases the perception of its persuasive intent. Similar to the previous model, increasing the extent also enhances the positive perception of the company's CSR efforts and its legitimacy and credibility. These proposed models, especially the first one, bear many similarities to the CSR dilemma model postulated by Bachmann and Ingenhoff (2016).

Thus, we can understand that increasing the extent of communication may raise consumer skepticism except for lower reputation sectors, where a higher extent of CSR disclosure may seem to help consumers to better understand their CSR efforts, as it lowers the perception of persuasive intent and psychological reactance. However, other factors mentioned by researchers and interviewed companies are essential in managing the extent factor to achieve the best possible results. These include content and channels used, stakeholder engagement, transparency, and authenticity, among others already mentioned.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided a comprehensive understanding of the paradox of CSR communication and identified effective strategies for addressing this complex issue. By employing a mixed methodology comprising a literature review, an online survey of Portuguese consumers, and interviews with six companies, the research successfully integrated theoretical insights and practical perspectives. Although each research method has inherent limitations, the triangulation of these data sources enabled a robust exploration of the CSR communication paradox and yielded actionable recommendations. It corroborates the assertion that organisations

should proactively disseminate information regarding their CSR activities, while simultaneously addressing the factors that influence the efficacy of such communication.

The synthesis of the findings yielded a set of six guidelines, designed to assist companies across a range of sectors in navigating the CSR communication paradox:

1) **Holistic View:** The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) encompasses a multitude of disciplines, including but not limited to management, ethics, politics and public relations. Consequently, while it is recommended that companies designate specific departments to address CSR concerns, it is imperative that their strategy be integrated into all communications and management strategies.

2) **Starting with the Company's Culture:** The concept of social responsibility is first established within the organisational context. It is therefore crucial that employees are fully informed about the company's CSR activities and feel a sense of ownership over them.

3) **Alignment between the organization's rhetoric and practice:** it is not sufficient for companies to merely espouse the values of corporate social responsibility; they must also demonstrate their commitment through action. Communication must be truthful, transparent, and genuine. Consumers value information and transparency; however, it should be aligned with the company's culture, regular, and focused on the positive outcomes of CSR efforts, rather than on the company itself.

4) **Awareness of Communication Scope:** There is a fine line between providing information and engaging in self-promotion. Consumers value information and transparency; however, it should be aligned with the company's culture, regular, and focused on the positive outcomes of CSR efforts, rather than on the company itself.

5) Stakeholders' participation is the key: It is essential that companies engage with their various stakeholders at every stage of the process in order to foster shared value and mitigate negative reactance.

6) Innovation is a driver: The topic of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a prominent feature of today's social and political discourse. It is a reasonable assumption that any company with concerns about its future and its relationship with its stakeholders is investing in communication strategies related to its corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. Consequently, organisations must adopt a more innovative approach to develop more meaningful and impactful campaigns, while remaining mindful of the aforementioned considerations.

Limitations and Future Studies

As previously stated, the mixed methodology circumvented numerous constraints associated with the research instruments. Nevertheless, there were still research procedures and analysis that could have been conducted in a more comprehensive and detailed manner. As an illustration, the results of the questionnaire could have been subjected to further analysis using software such as SPSS, with a view to enhancing both the accuracy of the data and the precision of the proposed model.

The utilisation of a questionnaire is not without its own inherent limitations. These include the ability to verify the veracity of the responses or to elucidate the context in which they were given, as well as the necessity to construct the questionnaire with a reasonable or reduced number of questions to obtain a higher response rate. Consequently, a focus group may have constituted an efficacious alternative for the acquisition of more profound data.

About the company interviews, a significant proportion were conducted via email. This resulted in a diminution of the advantages inherent to interviews, thereby reducing flexibility and the capacity to adapt to the social

dynamics between the researcher and the interviewee. In-person and in-depth semi-structured interviews would have been the optimal choice.

It would be beneficial for future studies to examine real-world case studies of CSR communication from companies that have achieved varying degrees of success. This would allow for the identification of effective strategies and the confirmation of the guidelines generated by the present study. Furthermore, as previously stated, there appears to be a significant correlation between internal communication and organisational culture and the disclosure of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. It may therefore be beneficial to investigate the relationship between a robust internal culture and effective CSR communication.

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SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF SANTA CATARINA'S PROSECUTOR OFFICE (MPSC)

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Introduction

The concept of democracy is one that can be approached, but never fully achieved. It is not possible to identify a formula that will guarantee the consolidation of democracy in any given country. Democracy is not a set of political rules and institutions; rather, it is a daily process of responding to challenges and opportunities in the light of the structural conditions of each society. In the case of Brazil, democracy has proven to be fragile and unstable, characterised by recurrent governmental crises (Pérez-Liñán & Polga-Hecimovich, 2017). This study assumes that communication plays a pivotal role in a democracy and should be regarded as a structural factor with the potential to reinforce or undermine this 'social project'. The extension of freedom can be achieved through communication that is directed towards comprehension, as opposed to persuasion. Such freedom must extend beyond the mere act of selecting a leader. This encompasses the freedom to participate effectively in democratic processes, from the acquisition of basic information to the capacity to engage in advanced decision-making (Arnstein, 2002). In essence, democracy can be defined as a system of governance in which the

people exercise power (Bobbio, 2007). Consequently, even in contemporary representative systems, democracy must still uphold the principle of popular sovereignty.

The direct exercise of sovereignty, as exemplified by ancient city-states, is not a viable option in modern nation-states. The complete transfer of this power to third parties, whether rulers or technicians, would effectively result in the emergence of despotic regimes (Dahl, 2001). Consequently, contemporary democracy requires the availability of public forums for discourse, deliberation and the advancement of comprehension, wherein the dynamic formation of social entities is facilitated by communication between individuals and between individuals and organisations. Organisations have a role in the production and reproduction of the social structures and institutions under which they operate, and thus bear responsibilities within the communicational public sphere. The actions of public organisations have the potential to either reinforce or erode the foundations of democratic systems, depending on the efficacy of their communication strategies. In accordance with the Brazilian legal system, these organisations are obliged to provide information and engage in dialogue with citizens. Nevertheless, compliance with the relevant regulations is not the sole determining factor; rather, it is also a strategic imperative for the continued existence of these organisations. In contrast to the public sphere of the past, where opinions were filtered and presented by media professionals to mass audiences, today's landscape is characterised by interconnected networks of personal relationships. These networks facilitate sociability, support, information exchange, and a sense of belonging and social identity among individuals (Castells, 2006). In this context, the facilitation of dialogue in the public sphere through the use of information technologies can be conceptualised as a feedback loop. Improved access to information facilitates greater participation, which in turn enhances the quality of the information flow (Stiglitz & Weiss, 1992).

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are of significant importance in enabling networked communication, which, in turn, has

the potential to enhance citizen engagement in democratic processes. Nevertheless, the efficacy of this engagement is contingent upon the appropriate implementation of public communication strategies (Gomes, 2005). In this study, public communication is defined as the dissemination of information pertaining to matters of collective importance. It encompasses a multitude of elements, including governmental operations, political party activities, actions of the third sector, and, in certain instances, private initiatives. The involvement of public resources or the presence of public interest highlights the imperative to adhere to the standards of public communication (Duarte, 2009).

In light of the assertion that communication is a pivotal element in democratic systems and thus merits strategic consideration by public institutions, this article undertakes an analysis of a digital communication project proposed by the Santa Catarina Public Prosecutor's Office (MPSC), a Brazilian public entity tasked with the protection of individual and collective citizens' rights. In 2012, the MPSC initiated the 'MPSC em Rede' project, which aimed to foster a digital culture within the organisation and enhance its engagement with citizens. In order to achieve these objectives, the organisation employed the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The 'MPSC em Rede' project was created subsequent to the consolidation of the 2012/2020 Strategic Plan, in which the organisation established the following vision for the future: 'To be an institution that is accessible to the citizenry, that produces beneficial outcomes in the defence of democracy, the promotion of justice and the protection of fundamental rights'. The MPSC communications team proposed the implementation of a digital communications initiative with the objective of fostering dialogue between the institution and the public.

In addition to the implementation of a horizontally oriented communication strategy, the organisation was required to undergo cultural, procedural and managerial shifts in a bid to capitalise on the benefits offered by networks. This entailed a transformation of organisational practices, with the objective of facilitating the horizontalisation of communication processes, the

decentralisation of information production and engagement with diverse audiences. The “MPSC em Rede” project implemented a series of initiatives spanning various timeframes, including short-, medium-, and long-term measures. By the time the study was concluded, approximately 70% of the project had been completed, thus enabling the evaluation of certain outcomes. It is particularly noteworthy that efforts were made to enhance the connection between the Santa Catarina Public Prosecutor’s Office and citizens through the utilisation of public communication facilitated by information technologies.

In order to ascertain whether the Santa Catarina Public Prosecutor’s Office (MPSC) is effectively utilising technology to facilitate interaction between public agents and social actors, thereby strengthening democracy, we sought to determine whether the MPSC is promoting social participation through its communication channels. In response to this, the article employs a detailed examination of the outcomes of the ‘MPSC em Rede’ project. At the outset of this study, an in-depth examination was conducted of the scientific literature on the challenges of public and organisational communication in fostering social participation via ICTs. Subsequently, an examination was conducted of the content of 453 communications posted on the MPSC’s social media platforms.

Literature review

The subject of public communication encompasses a diverse range of disciplines and social and professional practices. In recent years, the topic has gained ground not only in academic environments, but also in public and private institutions, as it responds to the social demand for more democratic, participatory, and inclusive communication.

The theoretical approaches are relatively recent in origin. For governments, public communication can be both a right and a duty, as it is consistent with the republican ideal. In the context of the media, public communication represents an intrinsic aspect of the liberal perspective of the press, which

is fulfilled in the course of its role in public debate. For civil society, public communication represents a legitimate and legitimising source of political and social decisions. In contrast, the market has been compelled to prioritize public communication due to its increasing accountability in light of the environmental crisis (Locatelli, 2011).

The concept of public communication has only recently emerged in Brazil. Notable foreign contributions to Brazilian research include Pierre Zémor's work, "La Communication Publique," as well as studies by Paolo Mancini and Stefano Rolando, and Juan Camilo Jaramillo López's contributions. Zémor (1995) defines public communication as operating within the public sphere, subject to citizens' scrutiny, and defined by its alignment with the broader public interest, transcending the narrow legal definitions of the public domain. The dissemination of information in public communication is, with few exceptions, in the public domain, as transparency is regarded as a fundamental principle for the benefit of the general public. Zémor further delineates public communication by its functions, which are closely linked to the objectives of public institutions. These functions are as follows: (i) providing information – bringing information to light, ensuring accountability, and fostering appreciation; (ii) listening to and engaging with public demands, expectations, questions, and debates; (iii) facilitating social cohesion – fostering a sense of collective belonging and promoting citizen awareness and engagement; and (iv) adapting to and accompanying societal changes, both in behaviour and social structures.

The approaches to public communication are closely aligned with the communicative constitution of organisations (CCO) perspective. In this framework, communication is not regarded as merely one component among many within an organisation. Instead, it is regarded as the primary mechanism through which organisations are constituted, structured, designed and maintained. The Communicative Constitution of Organisations (CCO) posits that organisations are essentially formed through communication itself (Basque et al., 2022; Grothe-Hammer, 2022; Seixas, 2017). The MPSC's approach to social media is aligned with the perspectives put forth by

Litschka and Krainer (2022), who posit that organisational structures exert a significant influence on organisational behaviour. In the contemporary era, the structures of the digital realm are characterised by decentralisation and interconnectedness. In this context, Kunsch (2012) posits that there will be a renewal in management and communication styles, oriented by decentralisation and participation. In response to the growing influence of the public/user/customer/consumer, organisations are adopting new operational, visibility, and engagement models, which are leading to the development of novel approaches to the practice, conceptualisation, and study of organisational communication in the contemporary context (Terra et al., 2017).

In Brazilian public organisations, communication is not merely a discretionary act; rather, it is a legal obligation enshrined in the rule of law. Access to public information is not merely a privilege set forth in the Federal Constitution; it is a fundamental individual and collective right that is intended to empower citizenship, which is a cornerstone of democracy. This right is of such importance that it is enshrined in international human rights legislation and regulations. It thus follows that the establishment of communication channels with society should constitute a central component of communication policies for public agencies and communication advisory/coordination offices. According to Kunsch (2012), certain principles are essential for guiding communication within public administration. Governmental institutions should be understood as open entities that actively engage with society, the media, and the production system. Such institutions must transcend bureaucratic confines to connect meaningfully with citizens, facilitated by collaborative efforts with the media. They are envisioned as entities that listen to societal concerns, address social demands, and establish channels to mitigate critical issues such as healthcare, education, transportation, housing, and social exclusion. Implementing these principles requires embracing the true purpose of state public communication, which prioritises the public interest.

The advent of new technologies, most notably the Internet, has expanded the avenues for citizen engagement across a multitude of domains, including social and civic initiatives, cultural pursuits, and leisure activities. Such activities facilitate citizen engagement with information streams, seamlessly integrating virtual reality with tangible experiences and utilising an array of technological communication platforms to cater to individual needs (Castells, 2006, p. 23). Nevertheless, the proposition that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) serve to augment the concept of the public sphere (Dean, 2001) continues to be a matter of contention. Those who espouse this perspective highlight the capacity of ICTs to facilitate dialogue. In contrast to conventional media, the internet is regarded as an open forum conducive to communicative rationality, thereby promoting autonomous and critical discourse (Dahlberg, 2001).

Habermas (2006) acknowledges the potential for technology to facilitate circumvention of controls in anti-democratic regimes. However, he also identifies concerns regarding the fragmented nature of networks. He notes that the Internet introduces deliberative elements to electronic communication, thereby counterbalancing the perceived deficiencies associated with the impersonal and asymmetrical nature of broadcasting. He posits that the Internet has reinvigorated an egalitarian public sphere comprising writers and readers. Nevertheless, its unambiguous democratic value is most apparent in particular contexts, such as the circumvention of censorship in authoritarian regimes that seek to suppress public opinion. Conversely, within liberal regimes, the proliferation of fragmented online chat rooms frequently results in the fragmentation of politically engaged mass audiences into isolated issue publics. For online debates to serve as an effective conduit for political communication within the established national public sphere, they must align with focal points of reputable sources, such as national newspapers and political magazines.

An alternative, less optimistic perspective on ICTs as drivers of a new public sphere is that the technology itself is not the primary agent of social

relationship formation. Such an approach would merely serve to reinforce existing relationships (Taylor & Marshall, 2002). From this perspective, efforts to involve the community in a project should be collaborative, neither top-down nor bottom-up, but rather proceed in a manner that may be described as ‘from the inside out’. The ‘inside-out’ approach entails the identification of the needs and pre-existing structures within a community, with a view to expanding and exploiting these structures. Public administration has yet to fully leverage the potential of ICTs in its communication efforts. Two primary reasons can be identified as accounting for this situation. Firstly, public bodies tend to employ these tools solely as one-way communication channels. Secondly, there is a notable absence of evaluations regarding the impact of these technologies on public engagement (Agostino, 2012).

In Brazil, public management does not typically employ ICTs for the purposes of participation and deliberation (Brandão, 2007). At present, organisations predominantly employ ICTs as unilateral communication channels and lack data on their effectiveness in engaging audiences (Agostino, 2012; Criado, 2021). Notwithstanding the considerable potential of social media, public organisations continue to grapple with the effective utilisation of such platforms as participatory tools (Sutton, 2009A ‘first-order transparency’ has been identified as a priority area, with a particular focus on access and the quality of information. This approach differs from a ‘second-order transparency’, which is concerned with interests, legitimacy, accountability and the secondary effects of disclosure. In this context, the emphasis would be on the institutions involved (Seixas, 2017).

A recent study assessing the strategic positioning of the Brazilian Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office (MPF) in the field of social communication reveals that, among the various phases associated with developing and implementing a communication policy – namely initiation, structuring, documentation, and internalisation – the Brazilian MPF is presently situated in the internalisation phase. This indicates that there is still a significant distance to travel

before a more interactive digital communication approach can be achieved and the level of second-order transparency reached (Silva, 2022).

As a management improvement tool, social media has the potential to facilitate increased transparency, support inter- and intra-organisational collaboration, and promote innovative forms of participation (Mergel, 2012). The implementation of ICTs to support participatory processes is seldom undertaken due to the high costs involved, a lack of political support and the insufficient technical expertise of technical staff to engage with residents using ICTs (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2023, p. 1). In the context of digital communication, Ribeiro (2013) identifies the capacity to engage directly with audiences as a key challenge for organisations. It is incumbent upon the organisation to integrate communication practices, heretofore the purview of specialised sectors and professionals, into its organisational culture. Ribeiro's (2013) approach is consistent with the Communicative Constitution of Organisations (CCO) perspective.

Methodology

In an effort to gauge the extent to which the Santa Catarina Public Prosecutor's Office (MPSC) fosters social engagement through its communication platforms, a total of 453 posts were gathered from the organisation's profiles on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Subsequently, the sample was subjected to analysis in accordance with the specific protocols established for each social media platform.

A non-probabilistic sample of 205 posts was collected on Twitter based on two criteria. (1) the period between April 2015 and June 2017, and (2) a methodical selection of posts. The systematic selection process entailed the identification of the final post published on the day of data collection (26 June 2017) and the subsequent selection of every third post preceding it. To illustrate, if the final post was published on a Monday, the preceding posts selected would be from the preceding Friday, and so forth, until 1 April 2015. The same selection rule was applied to Facebook, resulting in a sample of

198 posts published between 29 June 2017 and 1 April 2015. During the aforementioned period, the MPSC published content on Facebook twice daily. For the purposes of this research, one post per day was considered, with an alternating focus on morning and afternoon content. In the case of YouTube, a different approach was adopted. The 50 videos with the highest view counts up to the date of data collection, which occurred on 26 June 2017, were selected. Although the data presented is from 2015 to 2017, it remains valuable as it captures the dynamics and trends prior to the significant disruptions caused by the 2019 novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and the subsequent shifts in global patterns. The pre-pandemic data provides a crucial baseline for researchers to comprehend the initial conditions and behaviours prior to the advent of pervasive alterations, particularly in the context of deliberative democracy. In recent years, there have been notable shifts in the practice of deliberative democracy, influenced by changes in communication technologies, the rise of misinformation, and altered civic engagement in the post-pandemic era. By comparing this historical information with current data, researchers can better identify the magnitude and nature of these changes, thereby gaining deeper insights into how these factors have reshaped participatory frameworks, the public sphere and public discourse.

In establishing an analytical framework to address the research question, the framework developed by Luque (2012) and the scale proposed by Arnstein (2002) were employed. In his 2012 study, Luque presents a framework for examining the ways in which organisations can leverage information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance citizen engagement in decision-making processes. The framework is constituted of three dimensions of ICT usage, namely: (1) Information: This dimension pertains to the dissemination of information by organisations to citizens. (2) Deliberation: This dimension concerns the utilisation of feedback instruments and conduits by organisations for the purposes of dialogue and debate. (3) Decision-making: This dimension is concerned with the empowerment of citizens by organisations through the utilisation of ICT tools for decision-making.

Arnstein (2002) also addressed the issue of citizen participation, proposing an eight-level scale: level 1, manipulation (non-participation); level 2, therapy (non-participation); level 3, information (minimum concession of power); level 4, question (minimum concession of power); level 5, pacification (minimum grant of power); level 6, partnership (citizen power); level 7, deliberation (citizen power); and level 8, citizen control (citizen power). In order to analyse the social media content of MPSC, categories and subcategories were created based on Luque's framework and Arnstein's scale, as illustrated in Illustration 1. Table 1 presents the classification plan for the analyses.

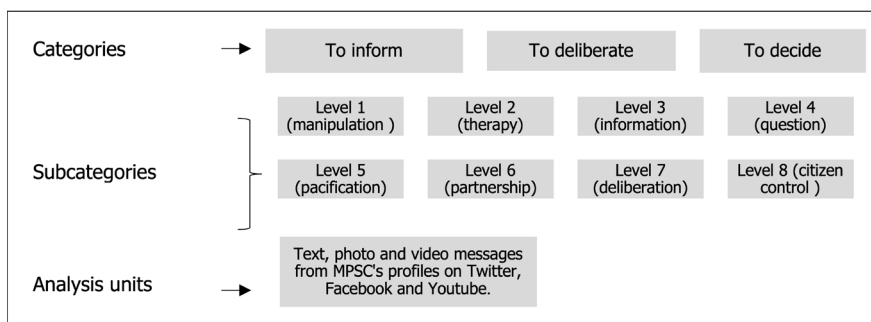


Illustration 1. Categories and subcategories of content analysis of MPSC's social media. Note. Created by authors.

Table 1. Classification planner for content analysis.

Dimension of the use of social media by the MPSC	Participation level
<p>To inform All posts to inform citizens have been classified as an informative dimension.</p>	<p>Level 1 (manipulation) Posts with no interaction between the institution and the citizen (no likes, shares, or comments) have been classified as level 1. Furthermore, the content analysis shows that citizen is invited to participate, but their opinion is not considered in decision-making.</p>
<p>To deliberate Posts that allow citizen feedback, and encourage debate, dialogue, and participation have been classified as a deliberative dimension.</p>	<p>Level 2 (therapy) Posts with no interaction between the institution and the citizen (no likes, shares, or comments) have been classified as level 2. Furthermore, the content analysis shows MPSC considers the citizen technical or even mentally incapable.</p>

To decide

Posts that allow effective participation in organisational processes have been classified as a decision-making dimension. Examples of ICT tools in this dimension are online polls, petitions, and referendums.

Level 3 (information)

Posts with likes and/or shares have been classified as level 3. In this context, MPSC uses informative language.

Level 4 (question)

Posts with comments have been classified as level 4. Regardless of the content, the citizen has used the space for participation. Despite that, the dialogue does not go beyond the virtual environment. There is only interaction in the digital channel.

Level 5 (pacification)

Posts with comments and participation going beyond the virtual environment have been classified as level 5. In this case, MPSC takes some practical action, even if the outcome is not the one expected by the citizen.

Level 6 (partnership)

Posts with comments and dialogue between citizens and organisations have been classified as level 6.

Level 7 (deliberation)

Posts with comments and deliberation between citizens and organisations have been classified as level 7.

Level 8 (citizen control)

Posts with comments and the citizens having some local decision-making powers were classified as level 8.

Note. Created by authors, based on Luque (2012) & Arnstein (1992).

Results

Twitter

The MPSC's Twitter profile was created in 2009 with the objective of facilitating enhanced organisational communication. In its infancy, the platform was primarily utilised for the dissemination of information, rather than fostering interaction with citizens. However, the strategy for Twitter was reassessed from the outset of the 'MPSC em Rede' project in 2012. In order to ensure compliance with Brazilian legislation, guidelines were established which prohibit the posting of comments that violate Brazilian laws concerning privacy, protection of children and adolescents, discrimination,

and prejudice, among others. Furthermore, the organisation implemented a standardised linguistic approach to its Twitter communications, characterised by a cordial, respectful, and encouraging tone. Although the language is informal, it remains professional and not overly colloquial. By the conclusion of the data collection period, the profile had amassed 5,655 posts, attracted 28,100 followers, and followed 16,700 profiles. Moreover, the 'MPSC em Rede' project established a systematic approach to citizen engagement, involving two organisational units: the Citizen Service and the Communications Office. The incoming messages are classified as simple, medium, or complex, according to the level of complexity of the response required.

Despite the implementation of various strategies to facilitate engagement, an analysis of the MPSC's Twitter feed indicates that it predominantly serves an informative function (Luque, 2012). Moreover, the level of participation seems to reach a plateau at stage 3, as illustrated by Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (2002). In accordance with the analytical model proposed in this study, 204 of the 205 categorised posts were classified as informative, with only one falling into the deliberative dimension and none in the decisive dimension. With regard to the level of participation, 191 tweets reached stage 3, while 14 tweets advanced to stage 4, which signifies the establishment of dialogues with citizens through comments.

Facebook

The MPSC's Facebook profile was established in June 2014 with the objective of facilitating dialogue with the public and disseminating information about MPSC services, initiatives, news, campaigns, and events that directly impact citizens' lives. Similarly, the digital environment of Facebook is also characterised by explicit rules governing dialogue, which are consistent with those observed on Twitter. The terms of use provided to citizens delineate the circumstances under which the MPSC reserves the right to delete comments or exclude individuals from conversations. Such instances include violations of Brazilian legislation regarding data privacy, defamation, offence, perjury, or the promotion of campaign material from any party or individual.

At the time of the investigation, the profile had amassed a following of 27,485 individuals. The format of dialogue on Facebook is analogous to that of Twitter, with involvement from the MPSC's customer service and communications teams. The average response time is four hours, even for inquiries that are deemed to be complex. Immediate feedback is provided to citizens regarding the manner in which their queries were addressed, and they subsequently receive a comprehensive response.

The content on the Facebook profile can be classified into three categories: news, institutional content, and campaigns/programmes. Facebook is the platform where the most robust dialogue with society occurs, with citizens feeling particularly comfortable expressing their opinions. A content analysis of 198 posts revealed that while the MPSC predominantly utilises the platform for informative purposes (93 percent of posts), 45 percent of citizens feel motivated to engage in online conversations.

The extent of participation was measured by an examination of the degree of engagement exhibited by citizens with the institution in question. Irrespective of the subject matter of the post, if citizens perceived themselves to be empowered to express opinions, comments, questions, discussions or criticisms, the investigation classified this as level 4 participation or above. At this level, citizens are afforded the opportunity for interaction, even in the absence of formal incorporation of such participation into the institution's decision-making processes.

YouTube

On 6 October 2008, the MPSC inaugurated a YouTube channel with the objective of disseminating educational content to the general public. The channel was created with the intention of enhancing public awareness of civil rights and the role of the organisation within the Brazilian legal system. It is noteworthy that the MPSC was the first entity within the Brazilian justice system to utilise a YouTube channel as an alternative to traditional television broadcasting. This decision was largely influenced by cost considerations (Ribeiro, 2013).

During the period of data collection for this research project, the channel remained dedicated to its original purpose of offering institutional and educational content to the public. At the conclusion of this study, the channel had amassed 2,614 subscribers, 721,518 views, and a total of 870 published videos. In contrast to the MPSC's other social media platforms, the YouTube videos are not restricted to the platform itself; they are also accessible on various pages of the institutional website and are shared with other institutions. To illustrate, the videos are accessible on the television channel of the Federal University of Santa Catarina and the channel of the Legislative Assembly, thereby significantly broadening their reach beyond the confines of the virtual social network.

Although the primary objective of the YouTube channel is not to foster citizen participation, an examination of the 50 most viewed videos (ranging from 107,925 to 2,517 views) indicates that users do engage with the content. Of the 50 videos analysed, only three can be classified as belonging to the deliberative dimension, as they actively encourage viewers to engage in dialogue and share their opinions. The majority of the videos (47 out of 50) adhere to an informative and educational tone (see Figure 6). With regard to the interactions between the organisation and society, level 4 (participation) is the most prevalent (see Figure 7). Notwithstanding the fact that the organisation in question does not necessarily incorporate these comments into its decision-making processes, users are afforded the opportunity to express their opinions and initiate discussions on the platform.

The level of citizen participation on the MPSC's social media platforms is typically within levels 3 or 4, although there are occasional exceptions. Arnstein's scale (2002) outlines eight levels of citizen participation. Level 3, which is categorised as "information", represents the initial stage of effective participation. At this stage, the institution disseminates information to citizens regarding their rights, responsibilities, and available options. Although this constitutes a form of unidirectional communication, it constitutes a crucial foundation for further engagement. Level 4, designated as "question," entails the solicitation of feedback from citizens on the organisation's

public policies, projects, and programs. While the public is invited to contribute their views, there is no guarantee that these inputs will be taken into account in the decision-making process. Despite the fact that MPSC’s social media profiles permit users to express approval, share content and leave comments, there is no evidence that they are being used to actively facilitate public deliberation or to involve citizens in the decision-making process.

Interactions

The public may engage with the MPSC on the social media platforms of their choosing, in accordance with the norms and regulations set forth by the institution. The channels afford users the ability to express approval, disseminate content, and provide commentary. Additionally, the YouTube platform affords users the option to express disapproval through the “dislike” function. Table O2 illustrates the frequency of each type of interaction between citizens and the organisation on Twitter and Facebook.

Table 2. Distribution of variables likes, shares, and comments on the MPSC’s Twitter and Facebook social networks between April 2015 and June 2017.

No. of Interactions	Likes		Total	Shares		Tot.	Comments		Tot.
	Twitter	FB		Twitter	FB		Twitter	FB	
0	31	1	32	80	18	98	191	107	298
0-10	169	16	185	124	97	221	14	84	98
10-30	5	78	83	1	52	53	0	5	5
30-50	0	46	46	0	11	11	0	2	2
> 50	0	57	57	0	20	20	0	0	0
Total	205	198	403	205	198	403	205	198	403

Note. MPSC’s social networks between April 2015 and June 2017.

An examination of interactions on social media reveals a correlation between the type of interaction (likes, shares, and comments) and the social network (Facebook, Twitter). As illustrated in Table 3, the proportion of posts on Facebook receiving 50 or more likes is significantly higher than on other social media platforms, with a value of 28.78%. In contrast, no such

interactions were observed on Twitter. On Twitter, the majority of citizens (82%) engage in interactions that receive up to 10 likes.

Table 3. Contingency table with the association between the type of interaction (like, share, and comment) and the social network (Facebook, Twitter).

No. of Interactions	Likes		Total	Shares		Tot.	Comments		Tot.
	Twitter	FB		Twitter	FB		Twitter	FB	
0	31 (15%)	1 (0,5%)	32	80	18	98	191	107	298
0-10	169 (82%)	16 (8,08%)	185	124	97	221	14	84	98
10	5 (2,43%)	78 (39,39%)	83	1	52	53	0	5	5
30	0	46 (23,23%)	46	0	11	11	0	2	2
> 50	0	57 (28,78%)	57	0	20	20	0	0	0
Total	205 (100%)	198 (100%)	403	205	198	403	205	198	403

Note. MPSC's social networks between April 2015 and June 2017.

Table 04, in contrast, presents the frequency of each type of interaction between citizens and the organisation on YouTube. These interactions were separated due to the fact that on YouTube, a different type of interaction is observed, namely the expression of dislike.

Table 4. Frequency distribution of interactions between citizens and MPSC in the top 50 most-watched videos on the YouTube channel on June 26, 2017.

Grade	f_j	F_j	f_j (relative)	F_j (relative)
0	27	27	0,18	0,18
0-10	79	106	0,52	0,70
10-30	33	139	0,22	0,92
30-50	2	141	0,01	0,94
> 50	9	150	0,06	1
Σ	150			

Note. Top 50 most-watched videos on the MPSC's YouTube channel on June 26, 2017.

Discussion and Conclusions

It is evident that the MPSC's social media project has been instrumental in initiating dialogue with the public, thereby fostering a sense of community, which is of the utmost importance for the public sphere and democratic processes (Habermas, 2006). However, the organisation's approach is primarily focused on the dissemination of information, as opposed to actively engaging citizens in participation or decision-making processes (Pateman, 1992). It is noteworthy that the organisation did not engage citizens in its deliberative processes or decision-making mechanisms, which would have facilitated deeper levels of participation. Despite the MPSC's effective use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for the dissemination of information, ongoing communication initiatives to enhance participatory practices have yet to be implemented.

Although social media offers the potential for deliberation, the current focus on informative content represents merely an initial step towards the democratisation of communication (Pateman, 1992). The content disseminated on the MPSC's social media platforms is primarily informative and educational in nature, providing guidance to citizens on their rights but failing to facilitate meaningful participation processes.

The MPSC's communication strategy aligns with Zémor's (1995) description of public communication objectives, namely, to inform citizens, respond to societal demands, foster a sense of collective belonging, and adapt to societal changes. Similarly, this approach aligns with the prerequisites for public communication as outlined by Duarte (2011), namely the prioritisation of the public interest, engagement in dialogical processes and the adaptation of communication instruments to public needs.

Nevertheless, the model observed within MPSC's communication practices resembles what Kunsch (2012) termed "integrated organisational communication," which emphasises decentralisation and people-centric approaches but falls short of genuine participatory mechanisms (Pateman, 1992). In terms of transparency, MPSC primarily focuses on what is defined as

“first-order transparency,” which ensures the accessibility of basic information to citizens. However, it fails to address “second-order transparency,” which explores more profound matters of accountability, legitimacy, and the far-reaching consequences of institutional actions (Seixas, 2017).

Both forms of transparency are indispensable for the promotion of accountability and the fostering of public trust. While first-order transparency provides essential information access, second-order transparency addresses more nuanced aspects of accountability and legitimacy, which are crucial for a well-functioning democracy. Moreover, transparency serves not only organisational interests but also enhances the accountability of citizen-prosumers, who are individuals who actively produce content and influence the digital landscape. It is of the utmost importance to achieve a balance between the accessibility of information and accountability. This requires efforts to educate and empower citizens to engage in critical evaluation of the information they encounter. This is of paramount importance for the encouragement of informed and responsible political participation.

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PUBLIC SECTOR COMMUNICATION AND GENDER PERSPECTIVES. SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES OF ITALIAN REGIONS

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Introduction

The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-25 places considerable emphasis on addressing and eliminating gender-based discrimination within the European Union. The strategy's objective is to promote diversity and enhance human well-being as drivers for growth and innovation in all aspects of life (European Commission 2021). The concept of gender mainstreaming is recognised as a long-term approach to policy-making that integrates a gender equality perspective at all stages and levels of policies, programmes and projects. This approach is designed to facilitate the transformation of institutions and influence organisational culture (Eige, 2016). In this context, the use of gender-sensitive communication is of paramount importance in guaranteeing transparency, commitment, and the adoption of an intersectional approach that considers the interaction between a multitude of factors, including gender, ethnicity, disability, and sexual identity, with respect to both

verbal and visual languages. The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 explicitly emphasises the necessity of implementing institutional communication campaigns to combat violence, raise awareness, and avoid gender stereotypes in both verbal and visual content.

In this context, public sector communication is identified as a strategic tool for fostering a more inclusive society. This is achieved by reducing citizens' distrust towards institutions and renewing public administrations (PAs), particularly within the current hybrid and convergent media ecosystem. This issue has gradually become a prominent topic in public discourse with the emergence of new forms of online activism and queer movements that have encouraged the implementation of sensitive policies at both international and European levels to prevent and address discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Furthermore, there has been a notable increase in the focus on gender and public sector communication studies, particularly during the pandemic. Nevertheless, in Italy, the implementation of a gender-sensitive approach has remained relatively limited, despite an increasing emphasis on the use of non-discriminatory language in public administrations through institutional recommendations and local guidelines. Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature about the analysis of the employment of public communication professionals within the information and communication offices of Italian PAs, with a gender lens.

Based on these premises, this exploratory study researches the relation between the institutionalisation of gender-sensitive communication approaches and their implementation in social media practices. After introducing a theoretical framework on the following section, aims, methods, and data collection are explained. Subsequently, the main empirical findings are described, analysed and interpreted. The final section consists of discussion, conclusions and further implications.

Theoretical framework

The gender perspective in public sector communication

The topic of gender equality has gradually entered the public debate, gaining relevance only in recent years due to the emergence of new social movements and the expansion of gender equality to encompass all forms of diversity. This shift has been accompanied by the adoption of a gender mainstreaming approach (European Commission 2020) and an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991; McRobbie 2009; Ghigi, Rottenberg 2019). Concurrently, the attention towards gender equality has intersected with the sociocultural transformations witnessed in the last decade. Notably, the progressive perspectives of queer studies, especially in the digital era (Ross et al. 2020; Farris et al. 2020), have played a significant role in expanding the focus of inquiry beyond gender-based violence to encompass various forms of discrimination, including the rights of ethnic minorities, the LGBTQIA+ community, and individuals with disabilities.

Attention to gender differences has intensified in the field of media studies over the past few decades, with a specific focus on analysing gender representation in media narratives and the construction of stereotypes in both mainstream and digital media (e.g., Gill, 2007; Tota, 2008; Decataldo & Ruspini 2014; Buonanno, 2015; Ross & Padovani 2017; Buonanno & Faccioli 2020; Farci & Scarcelli 2022; Re & Spalletta 2023). Concurrently, scholars have also examined the gender issue in politics and political communication (Norris 1997; De Blasio 2012; Campus 2013; Belluati 2020; Saccà, Massidda 2021), and explored the intersection of neoliberal feminism in media representation and the influence of neoliberal ideologies on subjectivity and social change (Fraser 2016; Rottenberg 2018).

Within this context, public sector communication has been acknowledged as a strategic tool for promoting a more inclusive society, as it helps to alleviate citizens' distrust towards institutions and facilitates the transformation of public administrations (Zémor 1995; Spalletta 2010; Solito 2014; Canel, Luoma-aho 2019; OECD 2021; Lovari, Ducci 2022).

Looking specifically at the Italian scenario, studies on gender has largely remained on the margins of public sector communication (Lovari, D'Ambrosi 2022; Faccioli, Panarese 2022; Faccioli, D'Ambrosi 2023). The recognition of the significance of gender issues in public policies promoting equal opportunities and social inclusion can be traced back to the establishment of the Department for Equal Opportunities within the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in 1997 (Capecchi 2018). Furthermore, the United Nations' International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, initiated on 25 November 1999, and the growing visibility of this issue in the Italian media agenda have drawn attention to the urgency of raising public awareness. Campaigns addressing sexual and gender-based violence have long been developed as a prominent communication format within Italian public administration to address issues of discrimination and women's fundamental rights, serving as a means of education and awareness-raising (Giomi, Magaraggia 2017; D'Ambrosi, Polci 2017; Corradi 2022).

However, the integration of a gender-sensitive approach in institutional communication has emerged only recently, supported by various legislative reforms to guarantee equal rights and opportunities for women and men and to contrast gender violence. Particularly, the Red Code law of 19 July 2019, n. 69 has toughened new penalties in relation to domestic and gender violence, increasing the visibility given to the phenomenon of femicides in the media agenda (Lalli 2020). Recently, also for the threats posed by Covid-19, some communication measures aimed at eliminating stereotypes and increasing gender integration were promoted by the Italian Government (Chamber of Deputies, 2021). This approach aligns with the gradual development of a culture of public sector communication (Canel & Luoma-Aho, 2019), reflecting an increased recognition of the significance of information and institutional communication within the realm of public administration in Italy. This is also fostered by a regulatory landscape (the Law no. 150/2000 "Regulation of information and communication activities of public administrations") which has legitimised the communication function in the public sector. Furthermore, this recognition has been accelerated

by the ongoing process of digitization, not only expanding communicative interface through websites but also through an official presence on social media (Comunello et al. 2021; Lovari, Ducci 2022).

Italian public sector communication: features and evolution

In the European context, the Italian public sector communication stands out for its evolution and main features. The early scholars in this field highlighted it consists of as an autonomous discipline and professional field since the early 1990s (Faccioli 2000; Rovinetti 2010; Rolando 2014; Mancini 2002), in line with European institutions and a few other European countries, such as France and Belgium (Zémor 1995; Bessières 2018, 2019; Ducci et al. 2021).

This recognition runs parallel with the public sector's reform initiated and renewed over time, referencing principles such as transparency, simplification, participation, efficiency and effectiveness of PA. These principles are closely linked to the processes of public sector digitalization and administrative decentralisation, based on enhancing the role and powers of local authorities (especially regions and municipalities) in the common goods management.

Institutions' communication activities stand out communication of general interest (Arena, 1995; Faccioli, 2000) and the reference model to aim for in nurturing the relationship with citizens evolves from unidirectional and transmissive (citizens are passive recipients of institutions' messages) to bidirectional and relational one (Ducci, 2007 & or, 2017). The citizen is considered an active subject and is placed at the centre of PAs activities, committed to create a less asymmetric relationship based on listening and dialogue, in line with a vision of shared and participatory administration (Faccioli 2000). As a result, there is an institutionalisation of the communication function in both central and local PAs in the country, through the adoption of dedicated regulations, including the afore-mentioned law no. 150/2000, which is unicum in all of Europe.

This law, still in force today, has legitimised communication as a mandatory and continuous activity of PA. It has also provided for structures, tools, and professional roles dedicated to carrying out information and communication activities in every public organisation. These activities must be properly planned and coordinated. The law has also distinguished between institutional communication and political-institutional one (emphasising the separation between the political and the administrative identity of public administration). It encouraged the development of a service-oriented culture in communication with citizens within the Italian public sector, moving away from the traditional logic of propaganda. Indeed, there is an institutional communication carried out by structures and professional figures recognized with a certain degree of independence from the political leadership of public administration. However, in line with the theory of excellence, they maintain close contact with the dominant coalition and are involved in organisation's strategic decisions (Grunig et al. 2002; Lovari, Ducci 2022).

In this general context, the simplification of administrative language has been the focus of specific regulations aimed at greater clarity, accessibility, and usability of texts produced by institutions, considering the written language of public administration as the highest expression of institutional identity (Fioritto, 1997; Cortelazzo, Pellegrini, 2003; Vellutino, 2018).

In this process, a gender-sensitive approach has not always been considered, except for a reference found in Sabino Cassese's Code of Style for Written Communications from 1994 (Chapter 4: Non-sexist and Non-discriminatory Use of Language). The Code refers to groundbreaking work done on gendered language by Alma Sabatini (1982), aimed at overcoming androcentrism in Italian language while respecting its essentially binary grammatical structure. In fact, binary gender language excludes gender-neutral expressions, and includes only accommodates feminine and masculine forms for nouns, adjectives, pronouns, etc. The Code of Style calls for a departure from inclusive masculine or overly extended masculine in favour of a dual declension for expressions related to professional, familial, and social roles.

Additionally, it briefly highlights other interesting and unique techniques that show greater respect for the feminine gender. However, it's worthy to note that these recommendations were largely disregarded and rarely implemented in the public sector for approximately 15 years.

In general, numerous studies conducted on the communication practices have highlighted, over the years 2000, how unfortunately the implementation of Law 150 has occurred in a diversified manner in the country (Materassi 2017; Solito et al. 2020; Lovari, Ducci 2022). In this regard, a situation resembling a patchwork has emerged at the local level and in different sectors of PA (security, healthcare, education, etc.), also because there has been no provision for monitoring and a sanctioning system in case of non-compliance (Faccioli et al. 2020).

Moreover, over time a fragility of institutional public communication has tended to take shape, first because it has not always consolidated itself enough and defended itself from the ever-increasing invasion of political communication (Spalletta 2011; Rizzuto et al. 2020). And, second this emerges in the changed communicative context driven by the evolution of digital media.

Social media practices and gender sensitive approaches at a local level

As several scholars highlighted, over the last decade digitalization, hybridization, and convergence characterising the current media ecosystem (Chadwick, 2013; Papacharisi, 2015) have had a significant impact on public sector communication (Canel & Luoma-aho 2019; Lovari & Ducci 2022).

In general, the presence of Italian PAs on digital platforms has grown. There has been an increase in self-produced communication (Mancini, 2002), which is unmediated and creates greater proximity to citizens, promoting engagement. At the same time, hetero-produced communication has increased: a variety of actors (media, stakeholders, citizens, politics, etc.) can generate and share content in an increasingly hybrid and fragmented public sphere (Bennett, Pfetsch 2018; Bentivegna, Boccia Artieri 2020), making it more challenging for institutions to control this dimension.

This digital transformation has brought about a host of advantages and risks, which have become more prominent considering the global pandemic (Spalletta et al. 2021). Notably, innovative practices have been developed to enhance media and citizen engagement, leveraging the opportunities provided by digital technologies. However, simultaneously, conflicts surrounding gender issues have arisen within official channels and digital environments, which are further amplified through media coverage (Lovari & D'Ambrosi, 2022). These conflicts may manifest in the form of increased polarisation, propagation of incivility, and other challenges (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; van Dijck, 2020; Bentivegna, Boccia Artieri, 2021).

Many Italian PAs (both central and local) make significant efforts to experiment with new languages and communication techniques in digital environments. The tendency to create more synchrony with the connected society (Ducci, 2017) is evident in how the contents of official social accounts are managed by some Italian municipalities: use of storytelling techniques, attention to visual communication (use of images, infographics, videos), experimentation of co-production of contents involving citizens, etc. (Ducci et al. 2019; Faccioli et al. 2020; Allegrini & Spillare, 2021).

The incorporation of the use of digital media into the PAs communication strategies (Mergel & Bretscheinder, 2013) occurs in a heterogeneous manner in the country where, as mentioned earlier, there exists a communication divide among PAs (especially at a regional and local level), and different levels of recognition and valorisation of communication structures, roles, skills, and professionals' training coexist in different organisational contexts (D'Ambrosi et al. 2023).

However, communication needs of the public administration have long exceeded traditional boundaries (Solito, 2014) and a renewed centrality of public communication (also recognized by the OECD (2021) is present in Italy as well. There has been an ongoing debate (Comunello et al. 2021; Ducci & Lovari, 2021) stimulated by professional associations about updating the regulations, the need to strengthen the communication area within the PAs,

recognizing new professions related to digital communication (e.g., social media managers, digital communicators), and emphasising the importance of training for professionals, all while not neglecting the new challenges posed by AI.

The pandemic has made these needs even more evident, highlighting a context characterised by regional differences and fragmented experiences (Ducci, 2021), with strengths but also numerous vulnerabilities (Ducci & Lovari 2021; Lovari & Ducci 2022; Massa et al. 2022).

In this context, a recent exploratory study (D'Ambrosi et al. 2023) has found that the sensitivity to adopting a gender equality perspective is growing within Italian PAs. However, the efforts in this regard do not seem to have reached the same level of maturity and awareness as the municipalities involved in the research demonstrate in their strategic choices for digital communication.

Regarding this dimension, in a condition of substantial uncertainty, also due to the lack of national-level guidance and facing resistance from a large part of the political and administrative sector, Italy is in a phase of “transition”. Communicators, with their role as agency (Giddens 1979) within their organisations, can play a strategic function. So, the communicators' empowerment (Grunig, 2016) is very important but difficult to achieve since they risk being conditioned by the will of the political top of the institution.

Aims, Methods, and Data Collection

Taking public sector communication as a meaningful field in which to implement gender mainstreaming strategies, and considering the above literature, this exploratory study focuses on the interplay, at local level, between the institutionalisation of gender-sensitive approaches and their implementation in communication practices, aiming at investigating whether and how a gender-sensitive approach takes shape in Italian regions' social media practices. This will be guided by following research questions:

RQ1. What are the main features of gender-sensitive communication guidelines adopted by Italian regions? What areas and languages do they address?

RQ2. Do the Italian regions apply their own gender-sensitive communication guidelines when publishing on social media posting? In what way, both in terms of contents and languages?

Furthermore, based on the literature review, following hypotheses can be drawn and will be empirically tested:

H1. The institutionalisation of gender-sensitive approaches in public sector communication runs at different speeds at the local level because official guidelines (when adopted) tend to address different fields and languages.

H2. A marked imbalance between regulation and communication practices tends to emerge in social media postings due to different communication strategies implemented at the local level.

From a methodological point of view, we adopted a mixed methods approach (Creswell 2015), blending quantitative and qualitative tools in the content analysis (Krippendorff 2018) of guidelines for gender-sensitive communication guidelines and social media posting.

To select the case studies to be analysed in this exploratory study, we first mapped which regions adopted guidelines for gender-sensitive communication, detecting all Italian regions' websites and collecting the uploaded guidelines. The choice to consider official websites as the main information source relies on their fundamental role as institutional communication tool (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020). Therefore, we assume that the adoption of gender-sensitive communication guidelines must necessarily blend with its publicity on institutional websites.

This preliminary analysis revealed that only 6 in 21 regions¹ provided themselves with guidelines (or, better: accounted for the adoption on their website) for gender-sensitive communication. These regions are:

1. Although Italian territory is traditionally split into 20 regions, the two autonomous provinces of

- Emilia-Romagna [2015]²
- Piemonte [2017]
- Toscana [2017]
- Abruzzo [2019]
- Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano [2021]
- Lazio [2022]

From these 6 regions, selected four case studies were selected (namely Abruzzo, Emilia-Romagna, Piemonte, and Toscana)³, based on the following criteria:

- Geographic representativeness: one region for each area in which the Italian territory is usually split, that is North-West (Piemonte), North-East (Emilia-Romagna), Centre (Toscana), and South (Abruzzo).
- Political representativeness: two regions governed by a centre-left coalition (Abruzzo, Piemonte) and two regions by a centre-right one (Emilia-Romagna, Toscana)⁴.

These four case studies provide possibility to test H1 by carrying out a content analysis in all the collected guidelines aimed at understanding which

Trento and Bolzano (which belong to Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol Region) have autonomy and legislative powers similar to a region. Therefore, it implies that the total number of Italian regions to be considered amounts to 21 rather than 20.

2. Adoption year within the brackets.

3. We didn't consider Lazio because of the specific period in which our research took shape: after local elections, this region shifted from a centre-left government to a centre-right one, and therefore – regardless of the previous adoption of guidelines – it could influence communication strategies such as gender-sensitive approaches. On the contrary, Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano was excluded both due to endogenous reasons (its bilingualism affects upstream communication strategies) and exogenous ones (looking at the North-East area, Emilia-Romagna stands out as a more meaningful case study at least because of its benchmark for the public sector communication in Italy).

4. Over the last decade, Abruzzo has shifted from a centre-left government (2014-2019) to the current centre-right one (2019-), led by the governor Marco Marsilio (Fratelli d'Italia, the most important Italian popular right party). On the contrary, starting from the 70s (that is when Italian regions were established), Emilia-Romagna and Toscana have been under centre-left administrations, and this trend is confirmed also by the current governors Stefano Bonaccini (2020-) and Eugenio Giani (2020-), both members of the Italian Partito Democratico. Concerning Piemonte, since the mid-1990s each local election has resulted in a turnover between centre-right coalition and centre-left ones; the current governor Alberto Cirio (2019-) comes from Forza Italia, the Italian centre-right political party founded by Silvio Berlusconi.

fields and languages they address [RQ1]. This research stage allowed the development of an original protocol on gender-sensitive communication guidelines, to be applied thereafter in the analysis of regions' social media posting.

To test H2, all the contents posted on the four regions' official Facebook pages⁵ during March 2023 were collected through the SoMe tracking tool CrowdTangle. The choice for Facebook was because it's both one of the platforms with the highest number of users in Italy⁶, and the most widely deployed by PAs in their institutional communication (Lovari & Ducci, 2022). The focus on March is due to this month allows to analyse both ordinary coverage and media-hype – that is the International Women's Day (IWD, on March 8th).

The 232 collected posts were manually coded and then detected, after a pre-test (Freedman 2009), specifically addressing how they deal with gender-sensitive approaches both at languages and contents' levels [RQ2].

The last part of was aimed at scoring the performance of each region in facing gender issues. To this purpose, a performance index based on a four-level Likert scale (Corbetta 2014) was developed, allowing measuring the level of care (high, medium, low, missing) that each region pays toward a gender-sensitive approach both in guidelines institutionalisation and in their implementation in social media posting.

Guidelines analysis: main empirical findings

To answer RQ1, we focused on the gender-sensitive communication guidelines adopted by the four selected regions and analysed their structure and contents in terms of similarities and differences; the main achieved findings allowed us to develop a protocol to be applied in the following analysis of Regions' social media posting [RQ2].

5. <https://www.facebook.com/RegAbruzzo>; <https://www.facebook.com/RegioneEmiliaRomagna>; <https://www.facebook.com/regione.piemonte.official>; <https://www.facebook.com/regionetoscana.paginaufficiale>

6. Source: <https://wearesocial.com/it/blog/2022/02/digital-2022-i-dati-italiani/>

Patterning Italian regions' guidelines

The regional guidelines analysed are characterised by the fact that they differ considerably in terms of the year of their adoption, their length, and the organisation of their content.

In particular, the guidelines of Emilia Romagna were adopted in 2015, within the framework of the Regional Framework Law no. 6/2014, which aims at promoting gender equality and combating gender discrimination⁷. They consist of a 40-page document, divided into 3 coordinated sections:

- Products: pay attention to the language and images used in the main communication products (news and press releases).
- Processes: consider the gender perspective in the planning and management of a communication campaign.
- Internal communication: focus on the context and channels of internal communication and suggestions for better integration of the gender perspective.

In 2017 Piemonte adopted its guidelines, which highlight that the region addressed the issue of gender differentiation in language for the first time in the Regional Law no. 8/2009. They consist of 41 pages, organised in 2 macro-areas:

- General guidelines for equal language treatment, to follow on how to decline verbs, general words, and institutional and political positions considering gender diversity.
- Guidelines for normative, administrative, and communication contexts, to be applied to norms, administrative forms, and institutional communication (including both verbal and visual language recommendations).

7. The law, which pioneers guidelines publication, states: "The Region recognizes, for the coherent development of its gender policies, that language reflects the culture of a society and is a strongly symbolic component of it and that the generalised use of the masculine in language is a powerful tool for neutralising the cultural and gender identity not allowing an adequate representation of women and men in society" (Article 9, paragraph 1).

Also in 2017, Toscana issued its guidelines. The document addresses specifically the administrative language, is 10-page long, and it is organised in 2 paragraphs:

- The first concerns references, studies, and the aim of guideline application, along with information about dissemination and annual monitoring.
- The second, includes rules and indications to follow in administrative texts.

Finally, in 2019 Abruzzo adopted its guidelines for the correct use of gender in administrative language. They are 16 pages long and set language rules to be followed by the regional employees “in all those acts of internal and external relevance that are used daily in the Region”.

Looking specifically at contents, the analysis reveals that regional gender-sensitive guidelines differ in two main aspects: the fields they address and the language they consider. Concerning the fields, it’s possible to distinguish between:

- Guidelines to be applied only to the administrative and normative texts (such as circulars, determinations, resolutions, and internal communication, etc.): Abruzzo and Toscana.
- Guidelines to be applied to institutional communication, that include both the administrative and normative texts, and the wider range of regional communication tools and activities (such as press offices, public service communication to citizens, institutional campaigns, etc.): Emilia-Romagna and Piemonte.

Always in respect to the fields’ perspective, it’s important to notice that all the four regions’ guidelines don’t refer specifically to digital communication, because recommendations and/or rules on how to communicate within a gender lens on the region’s official digital channels (e.g.: social media accounts, and messaging apps) are not detectable.

Regarding languages, guidelines differ depending on whether they:

- Comply only with verbal language recommendations: Abruzzo and Toscana.
- Include also visual language recommendations: Emilia-Romagna and Piemonte.

Table 1 provides a summary of the different typologies of regional guidelines which emerge from the carried-out content analysis.

Table 1. Guidelines contents: addressed fields and languages.

Region	Fields		Languages	
	Administrative and Normative Texts	Institutional Communication	Verbal Language	Visual Language
Abruzzo	Yes	No	Yes	No
Emilia-Romagna	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Piemonte	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Toscana	Yes	No	Yes	No

Developing a protocol to detect the implementation of guidelines' recommendation

Piecing guidelines together, an analysis protocol that summarises all the shared criteria that regional guidelines provide for verbal and visual languages could be advanced.

Regarding verbal language, a general recommendation consists of a collective call to stop the massive use of “generic masculine”.

Common criteria among the four documents are as follows:

- Use professions in the feminine forms [e.g.: “l’assessora”, “l’avvocata”, “la presidente”].
- Prefer collective nouns and gender-neutral terms [e.g.: Giunta instead “assessori”; “le persone”].

- Split masculine and feminine forms [e.g.: “le/i dipendenti”, “i cittadini e le cittadine”].
- Prefer passive and impersonal forms [e.g.: “Si richiede...”; “Le domande sono ammesse”].
- Use surnames of women without an article Meloni [e.g.: not “la Meloni”].

Finally, the guidelines recommend that when the generic masculine is used in communication (especially in long texts), a special note should be included to indicate that this is for simplification purposes only.

The recommendations on visual language, adopted by only two of the four regions analysed (namely, Emilia-Romagna⁸ and Piemonte), suggest avoiding all stereotypical and non-inclusive representations, with a special reminder to pay attention to the following:

- Evolution of non-traditional and non-stereotyped professional and family roles [eg. avoiding female secretaries, nursing, and male doctors, promoting the interchangeability between men and women in families].
- Non-stereotyped colour attribution and illustrations [eg. avoiding pink for women, blue for men].
- Female figures that should not be depicted as decorative, passive, sexualized, objectified, or infantilized. Avoiding: “the depiction of the female smile in situations where it is incongruous” (Piemonte’s guidelines: 32).
- Application of an intersectional approach: representing diversities in ability and disability, ageing, ethnicities, socio-economic status, etc.

Social media posting analysis: main empirical findings

To answer RQ2, we focused on digital communication practices of the same four selected regions and analysed them aiming at understanding whether

8. Region’s guidelines provide illustrations and images as examples to clarify what to avoid and what to implement.

and how they implement guidelines' verbal and visual recommendations in their Facebook posting, and the attention they pay to gender issues (therefore, looking at the contents) [RQ1].

Before introducing the research main findings, it is interesting to preliminary note that the 232 collected posts come differently from the four regions both in terms of absolute values and daily average (Table 1), allowing to distinguish between:

1. Regions with a low number of posts and daily average: Abruzzo.
2. Regions with a medium number of posts and daily average: Emilia-Romagna and Toscana.
3. Regions with a high number of posts and daily average: Piemonte.

Table 2. Facebook posting, March 2023 / Analysed corpus.

Region	N. of Followers**	N. of Posts	Daily Average	N. of days without post	Total interaction*	Interaction (average)
Abruzzo	113868	25	0.8	17	439	17.6
Emilia-Romagna	249405	61	2.0	--	17171	281.5
Piemonte	160783	96	3.1	7	4360	45.4
Toscana	174527	50	1.6	7	366	7.3

* Total interactions sum comments, shares, and other reactions (love, wow, haha, sad, angry, and care).

** Data collected on May 8, 2023.

Complying verbal language recommendations

The first stage of social posting analysis concerned the verbal language, we fulfilled applying the developed protocol as explained. From a quantitative point of view, about half of the posts analysed (107 of 232) has to deal with gender-sensitive choices (generic masculine vs. masculine/feminine forms, impersonal forms, collective nouns, etc.), but the analysis also shows a widespread use of generic masculine, which occurs in a whole 69.2% of the cases. Unbundling data by region, several differences emerge in respect of

the individual attitudes of each region: Abruzzo presents a fully male-oriented communication (no gender-sensitive posts), while recurring to generic masculine consists of a widespread practice both for Piemonte and Toscana (respectively 76.1% and 81.3%); on the contrary, Emilia-Romagna stands out for a better practice, considering that the percentage of its posts which shows gender-sensitive verbal solutions amounts to 54.3% (despite the 45.7% which doesn't quite the generic masculine) (Table 3).

Table 3. Generic masculine.

Region	Total N. of Posts	N. of Posts dealing with gender issues	N. of Posts which recur to generic masculine	Average (%)
Abruzzo	25	10	10	100.0
Emilia-Romagna	61	35	16	45.7
Piemonte	96	46	35	76.1
Toscana	50	16	13	81.3
Total	232	107	74	69.2

Shifting from quantitative perspective to qualitative one, the analysis hands us a dictionary of terms which are more affected by the widespread use of generic masculine: recurring to masculine declension involves especially words such as “bambini”, “student”, “cittadini”, “professionisti”, in respect to which regions only rarely split masculine and feminine forms (e.g.: “bambini e bambine”, “studenti e studentesse”, “professionisti e professioniste”), or use collective nouns (e.g.: “infanzia”, “corpo studentesco”, “cittadinanza”).

The most effective examples which confirm this trend come to different posts that refer to social aspects of the whole citizenship life, such as the right to education, measures for students' housing, opening of new hospitals in the region, calling for tender for agriculture, and National Day against Eating Disorders. In these posts, regions appear to be not inclined in declining profession in the feminine form (e.g.: Piemonte quote as “Assessore con delega ai bambini” its female council member Chiara Caucino⁹; and

9. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064291135456/posts/595909019228797>

Abruzzo quote “Assessore alla Salute” its female council member Nicoletta Veri¹⁰) or splitting feminine and masculine forms (e.g.: Abruzzo quotes “I cittadini” in a post regarding health communication¹¹, while Emilia-Romagna refer to “gli studenti” talking about student housing¹²; “destinatari” and “imprenditori” recur in Toscana call for bids for agricultural activities¹³).

Looking at regions’ individual performances, some differences emerge between, on one hand, Abruzzo and Piemonte (which stand out for a marked “male-oriented” communication, which tends to ignore all the recommendations set in their guidelines), and on the other hand Emilia-Romagna and Toscana, which social posting appear more gender-sensitive oriented.

Both these regions, in fact, pay specific attention to the gender declination of institutional roles and tend to split masculine and feminine forms. For instance, in some posts Toscana approaches the declension of professions using the feminine for political women (e.g., “la presidente”, “la capo ufficio stampa”¹⁴) such as for creative professionals (e.g., “la produttrice”¹⁵). On its side, Emilia-Romagna usually splits masculine and feminine forms (e.g., “bambini/e”, “ragazzi/e” in a post regarding sustainable ways of moving¹⁶, or “donne e uomini”, in another one concerning the promotion of a regional podcast¹⁷).

On the contrary, while in the case of Emilia-Romagna the use of collective nouns, and passive and/or impersonal forms increases (e.g., “opinione pubblica” or “persone” in a post celebrating the World Sleep Day¹⁸), Toscana seems to lack care in respect of them, preferring to recur to generic masculine (e.g., “studenti” instead of “corpo studentesco” in a post promoting regional housing for disadvantaged students¹⁹).

10. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/397879510257269/posts/6380626238649203>

11. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/397879510257269/posts/6380403498671477>

12. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100067083444704/posts/531370479109062>

13. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100067083444704/posts/533421812237262>

14. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100067083444704/posts/532597055653071>

15. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100067083444704/posts/535672712012172>

16. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064805822954/posts/603691808467675>

17. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064805822954/posts/607475084756014>

18. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064805822954/posts/600461908790665>

19. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100067083444704/posts/531370479109062>

Finally, it's worth noting the paradox that characterises Piemonte: despite complete and in-depth official guidelines concerning verbal language in the field of institutional communication, this region tends always to overlook its own recommendations regarding female declination of institutional and professional roles, for example using the term *Assessore* instead of “*Assessora*”. However, when social posting must deal with the international scenario, Piemonte applies the feminine declension for professional and institutional roles fulfilled by women. It happens, for example, in the post which report the meeting between its President and the European Commissary to Cohesion and Reforms Elisa Ferreira²⁰, where Piemonte recurs to the symmetry of professions, declining the feminine form *la commissaria* instead of “*il commissario*” (Figure 1). The same trend is detectable in another post, where the regional vice president met the Italian General Consul, Caterina Gioiella, in an international consensus²¹; also in this case the Consul's professional role is declined in the feminine form (using “*la console*” instead of “*il console*”) (Figure 2).

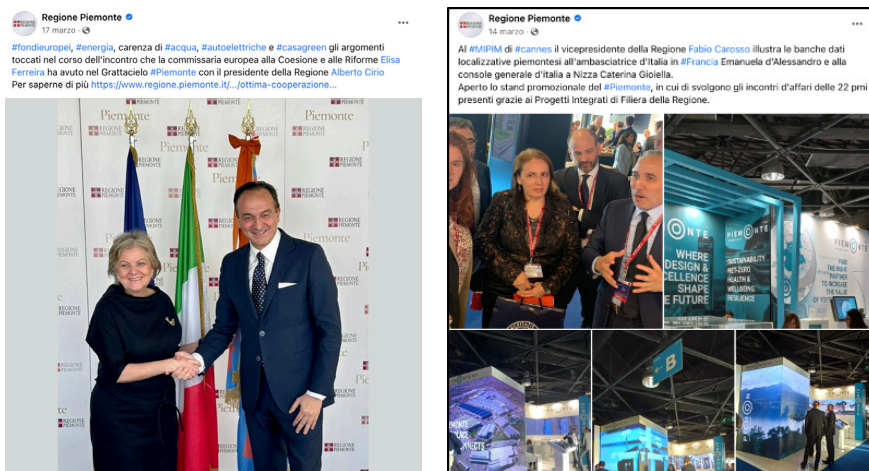


Figure 1 and Figure 2.

20. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064291135456/posts/597071212445911>

21. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064291135456/posts/595459085940457>

Enforcing guidelines in visual approaches

Concerning visual approaches, content analysis confirms the strategic role they played in social media communication practices (Aiello & Parry, 2023): almost all posts include (audio)visual contents, consisting of videos (20.3%) or more commonly one or more photographs (50.4%), images (19.4%) or infographics (7.3%); on the contrary, audio-visual contents lack in only 6 in 232 posts, all accountable to Piemonte (which is, it should be noted, the region with the highest number of posts published in the analysed time frame) (Table 4).

Table 4. Audio-visual contents.

Region	Nr. of Posts (Total)	N. of Posts with (audio) visual contents				%
		Image	Photo	Infographics	Video	
Abruzzo	25	5	2	6	12	100.0
Emilia-Romagna	61	3	49	5	4	100.0
Piemonte	96	27	36	4	23	93.8
Toscana	50	10	30	2	8	100.0
Total	232	45	117	17	47	97.4

However, if quantitative analysis tends to show the similarities among the four analysed regions as to the extent to which social posting employs images, qualitative analysis - by focusing on which images are used and how in respect to verbal texts - allows to highlight the main differences.

Looking at Emilia-Romagna, it stands out for a strategic use of visual languages: if verbal language often resorts to the over-extended masculine (see 5.1), visual language unquestionably rebalances gender representations, thanks especially to images and photos that respect and enhance gender equality both in quantitative (same number of men and women) and qualitative terms (representing women in an equal position in respect to men). In particular, female characters are portrayed in a fair and inclusive way: the images, often part of a specific institutional campaigns, tend to show resolute women, integrated within the social and cultural context, working fulfilled and engaged in roles of responsibility. For example, posting about

the promotion of gender balance²² Emilia-Romagna strongly focuses on the evolution of professional roles towards non-traditional and non-stereotypical forms, reinforcing text with images showing young women at work also in traditional male contexts (Figure 3). Visual approach stands out also for an intersectional and inclusive approach: for example, posting about the employment of inclusion of students with disabilities who attend high schools²³, Emilia-Romagna provides text with images that show a very positive representation of disability without gender (Figure 4).

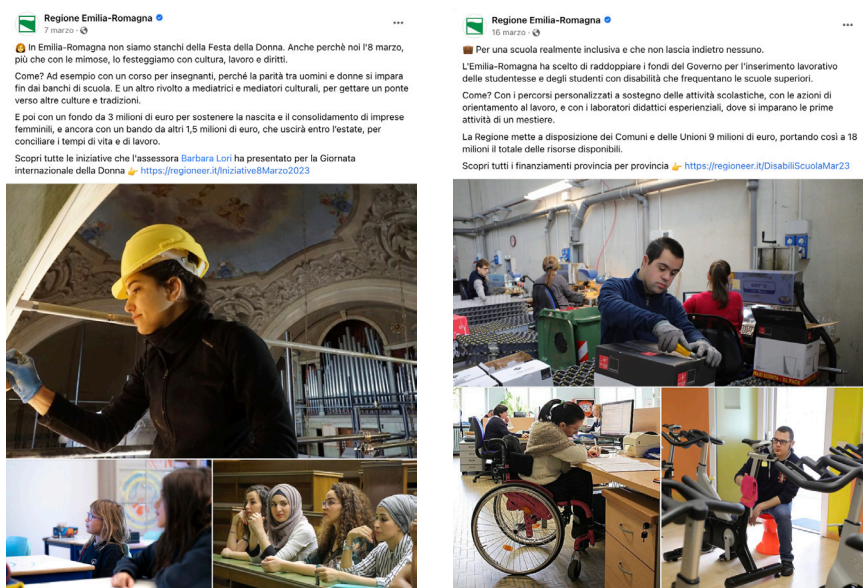


Figure 3 and Figure 4.

As for Toscana, its gender-sensitive visual approach appears to be in transition. In a social posting which mainly consists of images without individuals, a developing awareness about balanced gender representations tends to take shape both in quantitative and qualitative terms (for example, the weekly live streaming about weather conditions always show a man

22. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064805822954/posts/594117082758481>

23. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064805822954/posts/600062392163950>

and a woman who equally interact in presenting and discussing)²⁴ (Figure 5). On the contrary, the idea of a gender-sensitive transition which isn't yet finalised is confirmed by a very effective post²⁵, shared on March 15th: even though the image shows a positive representation of female labour (a female doctor who examines a male patient), however it furnishes a text focused on violence against healthcare workers, thus suggesting the idea of women as victims of verbal and physical aggressions (Figure 6).



Figure 5 and Figure 6.

Finally, Abruzzo and Piemonte confirm the strongly male-oriented approach already pointed out in respect to verbal language. In fact, their social posting stands out quantitatively because of a very limited representation of women, while from qualitative point of view, when depicted, women tend to play an ornamental (and strongly stereotyped) role, and they take place often (Piemonte) and always (Abruzzo) in a subordinate position in comparison to men (Figures 7-8).

24. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100067083444704/posts/2430899213752419>

25. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100067083444704/posts/536186731960770>



Figure 7 and Figure 8.

Detecting gender issues in Facebook posting

Shifting from languages' dimension to contents' one, the analysed Facebook posting deals with gender issues both in ordinary coverage and in the media-hype consisting of the International Women's Day (March 8th). Although each region seems to be consistent in the way in which it approaches both the dimensions, several and meaningful differences emerge upstream, concerning how each region deals with this topic.

To measure the relevance of the gender issues in respect of the overall Facebook posting, we considered all the contents which involves – in depth – gender topics, such as gender identities and stereotypes, gender equality, gender pay gap, violence against women, female diseases, motherhood, and of course the IWD. Overall, these contents amount to 6.5% of the total number of posts published during March 2023. However, unbundled data by region shows meaningful differences in individual approaches to gender issues: in fact, while Abruzzo completely ignores this topic (not posting any content about it), both Piemonte and Toscana appear slightly interested, standing at about the same rates (3.1% and 4%, respectively). On the contrary, among the selected case studies, Emilia-Romagna peaks with 16.3% of posts focusing on gender issues (Table 5).

Table 5. Relevance of gender issues.

Region	N. of Posts (Total)	N. of Post (only gender issues)	%
Abruzzo	25	–	–
Emilia-Romagna	61	10	16.3
Piemonte	96	3	3.1
Toscana	50	2	4.0
Total	232	15	6.4

This trend is also confirmed by the qualitative analysis. Focusing on the ordinary coverage, Emilia-Romagna stands out for an in-depth and wide posting about gender issues, which involves all the above-mentioned topics, often addressed from a not predictable point of view. For example, on March 9th, the region posts a message linked to the *Liberiamoci dalla violenza* communication campaign; addressing male audiences, it exhorts them to ask for help in case of violence against women: “If you have violent attitudes, if your partner is exasperated by them and afraid of you, we are here to help you change. Find out where the *Liberiamoci dalla violenza* Center is nearest to you”²⁶ (Figure 9). A few days later (on March 23rd), the region focuses again on this topic, encouraging citizens (in this case without gender distinction) to report violent episodes against women, and pointing out that “aggression toward one’s partner could have many faces: constant screaming, threatening, taking violent attitudes; and these are just a few examples”²⁷ (Figure 10). It is also interesting to notice that Emilia-Romagna’s all posts dealing with gender issues never consist of stand-alone contents, but rather belong to wider communication campaigns aimed at tackling gender-based stereotypes that create inequalities among individuals, promoting awareness about gender issues or empowering citizens to assume behaviours that convey positive messages of gender equality.

26. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064805822954/posts/595419682628221>

27. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064805822954/posts/603989425104580>



Figure 9 and Figure 10.

Instead, while no posts focused on gender issues come from Abruzzo, the attention that Piemonte and Toscana pay to gender issues concerns only the motherhood and healthcare perspective. Two posts shared by Piemonte refer to a specific public policy (the Fondo Vita Nascente) funded by the Region²⁸ (Figure 11), while a third one concerns an international cooperation agreement aimed at preventing female cancers²⁹. Referring to Toscana, on March 26th it posts about a 24-years-old regional project (called Mamma segreta) aimed at raising awareness about anonymous childbirth and at supporting mothers (and their unborn children) who choose it³⁰ (Figure 12).

28. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064291135456/posts/595440505942315> and <https://www.facebook.com/100064291135456/posts/595407579278941>

29. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064291135456/posts/596507989168900>

30. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100067083444704/posts/542048454079731>



Figure 11 and Figure 12.

The analysis of the media-hype confirms the above-explained attitudes: Emilia-Romagna stands out again because of a structured storytelling, consisting of several contents, related to specific institutional campaigns, and posted before, during and after the IWD. In particular, the region's posting clearly aims at suggesting the idea of a IWD not ending on March 8th, but rather spanning 365 days a year (Figure 13): an anniversary the region aims to celebrate confirming its commitment in providing women with culture, jobs and rights³¹, in achieving full equality between men and women³², in offering them screening campaigns against various forms of typically female cancers³³ (Figure 14), in reinforcing citizens' awareness in respect to violence against women³⁴.

31. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064805822954/posts/594117082758481>

32. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064805822954/posts/594665316036991>

33. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064805822954/posts/594778792692310>

34. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100064805822954/posts/595419682628221>



Figure 13 and Figure 14.

In terms of respect to this structured and in-depth coverage, Toscana only quoted the IWD in a single post published on March 8th and focused on a local event (moreover, not even strictly related to the anniversary)³⁵, while the Facebook pages of Abruzzo and Piemonte lack contents related to the IWD. However, it can be noticed that, while Abruzzo doesn't post any content on this day, Piemonte – giving priority to other topics³⁶ – suggests it intentionally chooses to overlook the anniversary.

Finally, both in ordinary coverage and media-hype, each region deal differently with the political perspective: on one hand, in accordance with a general trend which overcomes the coverage of the gender issues, Emilia-Romagna doesn't quote any political actors, thus confirming the strictly institutional function performed by its Facebook page; on the other hand, Piemonte and Toscana provide political actors (governors, assessors, etc.) with a wide coverage, quoting their statements, claims and remarks, and – overall – by meaningfully emphasising the political empowerment.

35. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/100067083444704/posts/532597055653071>

36. That is the creation of a fund allocated for environmental and water protection (<https://www.facebook.com/100064291135456/posts/591695829650116>) and the approval of an action plan aimed at overcoming the emergency for the 2019 weather events (<https://www.facebook.com/100064291135456/posts/591640612988971>).

The Performance Index

The final part of this work aims at scoring regional performances both individually and in comparison, to understand whether and how the adoption of guidelines is consistent with their implementation in social media posting, or whether and how regional communication practices stand out as more deeply gender-sensitive than guidelines recommend. To fulfil this purpose, a performance index is proposed, based on a four-level Likert scale, through which measuring the level of care (high, medium, low, missing) that each region pays to gender perspective, in terms of institutionalisation of gender-sensitive communication guidelines and their implementation in Facebook posting. Each level of care matches with a coloured label and is turned into a score as shown in Figure 1.

LEVEL OF CARE	LABEL	ICON	SCORE
High Level	Dark Green		3
Medium Level	Light Green		2
Low Level	Yellow		1
No Level	Red		0

Figure 1. Correspondence between levels of care, labels and score.

To evaluate the performance of each region in respect to guidelines institutionalisation, the quoted fields (only administrative and normative texts, or also institutional communication) and languages (only verbal language, or also visual one) that the guidelines address are taken into account. Of course, considering that all the analysed regions have adopted guidelines, none receives a red label, which consists of guidelines' lack. The typology of performance achieved by each region depends on whether guidelines address:

- Only administrative and normative texts, providing recommendations only about verbal language: it is the minimum level of regulation, which allows to achieve a yellow label.
- Both Administrative/normative texts and institutional communication, providing recommendations only about verbal language: it stands out as an intermediate level, which results in a light green label.
- Both Administrative/normative texts and institutional communication, providing recommendations about both verbal and visual languages: the most complete guidelines' approach to gender-sensitive communication, which allow to achieve a dark green label.

Figure 2 shows the conversion table, applying which Emilia-Romagna and Piemonte score a dark green label, because their guidelines address both administrative/normative documents and institutional communication and cover both verbal and visual languages, while Abruzzo and Toscana achieve a yellow label, because their guidelines address only administrative/normative documents and verbal language.





GUIDELINES WHICH ADDRESS		LABEL	REGION
FIELDS	LANGUAGES		
Administrative and normative texts + Institutional communication	Verbal + Visual		Emilia-Romagna Piemonte
Administrative and normative texts + Institutional communication	Verbal		<i>None</i>
Administrative and normative texts	Verbal		Abruzzo Toscana
No Guidelines			<i>None</i>

Figure 2. Conversion table (from fields / languages to labels) and achieved labels.

To evaluate regions' performance in communication practices, we needed to distinguish two different variables, which consist in how Facebook posting implements guidelines' recommendations concerning verbal (sub-variable 1) and visual (sub-variable 2) languages, and in how it deals with gender

issues both in ordinary coverage (sub-variable 3) and media-hype (sub-variable 4). The way in which each region complies with each sub-variables results in a different level of care and related labels (Figure 3).

REGION	LANGUAGES		CONTENTS	
	VERBAL	VISUAL	ORDINARY COVERAGE	MEDIA HYPE
Abruzzo	●	●	●	●
Emilia-Romagna	●	●	●	●
Piemonte	●	●	●	●
Toscana	●	●	●	●

Figure 3. Conversion table (from languages / contents to labels) and achieved labels.

Focusing on the languages' perspective, the analysis of verbal language doesn't allow to award any dark green label, because no one region fully implements guidelines in its Facebook posting. In fact, all regions tend to frequently recur to an overly generic masculine, which however they never declare (even though guidelines strongly recommend it). However, meaningful differences emerge in respect to the way in which each region complies with the other recommendations, and it results in a different labelling. Emilia-Romagna achieves a light green label thanks to the attention it pays in the use of collective nouns and gender-neutral forms, passive and/or impersonal forms, feminine forms for professional and institutional roles. On the contrary, Toscana scored a yellow label because of its recurrent use of feminine forms for professional and institutional roles. Finally, Abruzzo and Piemonte achieve a red label, due to a strongly male-oriented communication, which tends to ignore all guidelines' recommendations.

Shifting from verbal language to visual approach, the previous performances tend to be confirmed, although in this case also the dark green label is scored: Emilia-Romagna achieves it thanks to a structural gender-sensitive visual approach aimed at strategically supporting/integrating verbal languages, and which takes shape especially in a marked balanced representation of familiar and professional roles, and an inclusive and intersectional approach. On the contrary, Toscana scored a yellow label because of a

visual communication clearly in transition toward a more gender-sensitive approach, but not yet marked by the same level of care that characterises Emilia-Romagna. Finally, the red label achieved again by Abruzzo and Piemonte confirms their being strongly male-oriented also in the visual approach, due to marked unbalanced representations of professional roles, and female representations often ornamental and stereotyped.

Looking at the contents' perspective, no differences tend to emerge between ordinary coverage and media-hype, with the only exception of Piemonte.

Referring to the IWD, in fact, Emilia-Romagna achieves a dark green label because of a structured storytelling, consisting of several contents, related to specific institutional campaigns and posted before, during and after the anniversary. On the contrary, Toscana scores a yellow label, because the IWD is only quoted in a single post, published on March 8th, which reports a local event not strictly related to the anniversary. Finally, Abruzzo and Piemonte achieve a red label because of the lack of contents related to the IWD.

The labels achieved by Emilia-Romagna, Toscana and Abruzzo (respectively: dark green, yellow and red) are confirmed by the analysis of ordinary coverages, characterised by an in-depth and wide coverage of gender issues, which involves several topics such as gender equality, gender pay gap, violence against women, etc. (Emilia-Romagna); a rising attention to gender issues, but only concerning the motherhood perspective (Toscana); no content focused on gender issues (Abruzzo). On the contrary, Piemonte's performance grows from a red label to a yellow one, thanks to the attention it pays to gender issues, even though – as for Toscana – it is limited to the motherhood perspective.

So rated each region's performance, the final stage of this work consists of positioning the 4 case studies within a Cartesian system, where the y-axis conveys the typology of adopted guidelines, while the x-axis shows the level of attention to gender-sensitive approaches in Facebook posting. The point where they meet is called the origin and has [0, 0] as coordinates; it coincides

with the extreme case consisting of a region that has not adopted guidelines and provides itself with never gender-sensitive communication practices.

Looking at each region's positioning, Abruzzo places at the bottom left, because of very basic and not applied guidelines matching with a male-oriented communication, while always a low vertical position (but horizontally more oriented toward the middle) hosts Toscana, where basic guidelines match with an ongoing transition to more gender-sensitive communication practices. On the contrary, the upper right-hand corner marks Emilia-Romagna, provided with very in-depth and intensive applied guidelines. Finally, the most borderline (and interesting) case is represented by Piemonte, positioned at the upper left-hand corner due to very in-depth guidelines which match with a fully male-oriented communication (Figure 4).

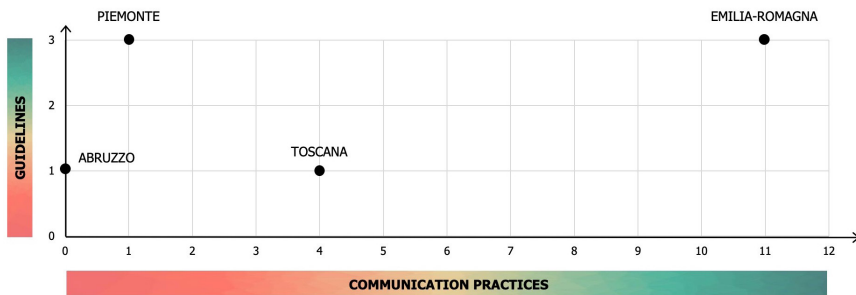


Figure 4. Cartesian representation of regions' performances.

Discussion and conclusions

The final section of this study aims to present a discussion of the main findings of the empirical research, thus testing the hypotheses and answering the research questions set out in section 2. In addition, it will draw out the main conclusions and identify potential avenues for future research.

In regard to the initial hypothesis (H1) and the associated research question (RQ2), the data substantiate the findings of recent studies on the gender perspective in Italian public sector communication at the municipal level

(D'Ambrosi et al., 2023). These studies indicate that the institutionalisation of gender-sensitive approaches is occurring at varying rates at the regional level. This is because the official guidelines (when adopted) tend to diverge from each other in terms of the distinct areas and languages they address. This tendency is evident from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. In terms of the former, only six regions have adopted guidelines on gender-sensitive communication. With regard to the latter, only Emilia-Romagna and Piemonte have adopted guidelines that address institutional communication and visual language. In contrast, the other guidelines analysed focus only on administrative/normative texts and verbal language. It is also noteworthy that all the guidelines appear to exclude social media communication.

It is our contention that this phenomenon may be attributed to two distinct causal factors. On the one hand, the principal findings of the research indicate a challenge (and potentially a “cultural resistance”) in the process of institutionalising a gender-sensitive approach within official guidelines. This is exemplified by the promotion of such guidelines in terms of visibility, where they have been adopted. Indeed, while regional authorities demonstrate a noteworthy commitment to disseminating information about regional gender equality plans and advocating for actions and initiatives addressing issues such as discrimination and violence against women, the implementation of gender-sensitive communication guidelines appears to be inconsistent. Conversely, the guidelines were created during a period when social media had not yet become a fully institutionalised tool for public sector communication (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013). There is no evidence of any effort to update them. Consequently, the adoption of a gender-sensitive approach in public sector communication can be seen as a cultural process that has been underway for some years, but which is uneven (D'Ambrosi et al., 2023).

In relation to the second hypothesis (H2) and the associated research question (RQ2), it was hypothesised that there would be a significant disparity between the regulatory and communication practices observed in

social media posts. This was due to the differing communication resources (in terms of dedicated structures, professionals, etc.) and communication strategies employed at the local level, as highlighted in the theoretical framework. Overall, the findings of this research tend to confirm the aforementioned hypothesis. This is because none of the regions analysed fully implemented the guidelines that refer to both verbal and visual language. Furthermore, the issue of gender is not adequately addressed and covered in both ordinary coverage and media hype. Verbal language is acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of gender-sensitive guidelines in public sector communication. However, our research indicates that the transition from theoretical principles to institutionalised communication practices is still underway. As previously stated in section 5.1, the primary challenge pertains to the extensive utilisation of the generic masculine and the absence of distinction between collective nouns and impersonal forms.

In this context, the aforementioned phenomenon can be attributed to a number of factors, primarily associated with the realm of social media communication. The implementation of guidelines in these digital environments may result in undue burdens on communication, and may not align with the intrinsic characteristics of social media communication. This could potentially impact the effectiveness of institutional interaction with the public. Another potential reason for this discrepancy could be related to the differing perceptions and awareness of the public engaged in social media environments compared to those engaged with traditional media. The latter are based on more direct and colloquial criteria of expression (Faccioli et al., 2020). While these promote greater proximity and closeness, they can also expose institutions to criticism and even the risk of incivility (Bentivegna, Boccia & Artieri, 2020).

Furthermore, it is essential to consider the impact of political governance, as our research indicates that regions governed by left-wing coalitions tend to demonstrate greater gender sensitivity than regions led by right-wing coalitions. As previously highlighted by D'Ambrosi et al. (2023), the empowerment of communicators (Grunig, 2016), including their creative

margin, autonomy and experimentation, can be constrained and inhibited by the resistance of bureaucratic apparatuses and political orientations on gender issues. Some of them rely on customary practices or await lengthy periods for decisions from the political leadership, which carries a significant risk of political influence (Solito, 2018). Others may be deterred by concerns that aligning with media logic or responding to the sentiments of a connected audience could compromise their organisation's reputation.

In conclusion, this research confirms that public communication is becoming an increasingly strategic space in which society, in all its articulations (institutions, professionals, citizens, etc.), experiments with communicative practices that, on a daily basis, reshape the relations of trust between the different actors on an issue as widespread as gender. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research, given that it is an exploratory study focused on a select number of Italian regions. However, it is noteworthy that the methodology developed through this study can be applied to the analysis of other local contexts, including regions and municipalities. This methodology is suitable for measuring and understanding the ways in which public authorities (PAs) approach gender-sensitive communication in both traditional and digital contexts.

Similarly, future research, supported by in-depth interviews, should investigate the relationship between institutional languages, gender perspectives and communication strategies from the perspective of professionals. Indeed, if institutional communication in the public sector is identified as an effective space in which innovative gender-sensitive communication practices could be developed and tested, their adoption also depends on the awareness and responsiveness of public communicators. These factors shape established practices, which in turn inform communication strategies.

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THE SUSTAINABILITY NARRATIVE CHALLENGE: THE SECIL GROUP

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Introduction

Private sector organisations operate as social actors, requiring continuous approval from stakeholders to sustain their license to operate. This implicit and explicit consent—granted by authorities, communities, clients, suppliers, employees, and shareholders—underscores the importance of maintaining legitimacy. Legitimacy enables organisations to secure resources, institutionalise their roles in society, and navigate scrutiny from an increasingly vigilant public. Legitimacy is the condition for a company to exist, thrive, and obtain the necessary resources, such as investments, committed employees, business and sales partners, and political support (Rendtorff, 2020). Legitimacy ensures the institutionalisation of organisations in society, and all institutionalised conduct involves roles that participate in institutionalisation's controlling character (Berger & Luckmann, 2010).

In this sense, the role of the public relations (PR) professional is, in a planned and sustained manner, to establish and maintain mutual understanding between the organisation and its stakeholders. Thus, legitimise organisations in society (Meng & Berger, 2013). Through mutually beneficial relationships, this professional intentionally aims to create and maintain a positive image with stakeholders to influence their reputation. For

Brown et al. (2006), the image of an organisation is the combination between the intended image and the interpreted image. The intended image is what the organisation wants others to think about it, thus being the result of the organisation's communication actions (Villafañe, 1999). The interpreted image is the idea that organisation members have about how stakeholders see the organisation (Brown et al., 2006). The organisation's image influences its identity and reputation. Organisational identity is the combination of organisational culture and the image of stakeholders (Hatch & Schultz, 2002, p. 1004). Reputation is more enduring and outside the organisation's control. It is the overall assessment of external stakeholders based on several factors over time: how the organisation presents itself, how stakeholders perceive it, and how the media represent it (Gilpin, 2010). Although it is somewhat influenced by the message the organisation intends to send (intended image), it also depends on external sources such as competitors, industry analysts, activists, and the media (Brown et al., 2006).

Being one of the influences of reputation, the media, in particular journalists who work in the media, have special attention from organisations and, therefore, the role of press officer or media advisor is one of the PR specialisations more present in companies (Sebastião, 2021). The media influence organisations' reputations because they are a vital element in the public information system of a society. They remain one of the main spaces for discussing matters of public interest, even though recent technological advances have transformed how people inform, communicate, and construct social reality. The spread of the internet, mobile communication, and the variety of software tools have developed what Castells (2022) calls a network society, which has allowed the emergence of mass self-communication, where anyone can be a communication channel. However, it is precise because of this context of information fragmentation in the digital environment and, mainly, the pollution of the information space by "fake news" that journalists working in the media have stood out since, even if they have limitations, they inform citizens (Castells, 2022), being regulated and following ethical and deontological precepts, which gives them credibility (Sebastião, 2021).

Since the organisational image is vital to building and managing the relationship among stakeholders and achieving legitimacy (Frandsen, 2017), organisations look to the media to disseminate the narrative of the intended organisational image and thus do reputation management (Gilpin, 2010). The environmental implications caused by the cement industry, such as waste generation, CO₂ emissions, and damage to biodiversity, represent a particular challenge for the reputation of organisations in the sector since organisations in this industry are under permanent scrutiny by the stakeholders (including the media) and are increasingly subject to laws and regulations aimed at limiting their actions (Zuo et al., 2012). In this sense, PR professionals need to build the narrative of these organisations, highlighting the effort to mitigate the environmental implications and their contribution to society by building homes and infrastructure for people, generating jobs, and the benefits to the communities where they are present. However, implementing a sustainability narrative must not lead the organisation into greenwashing, misleading practices that create false positive perceptions about the organisation's environmental performance (Nemes et al., 2022). Greenwashing is responsible for the public's distrust of journalists, governments, and companies regarding climate change (Edelman, 2022).

This article aims to understand how the media frame the public image intended by the Secil Group in Portugal. Secil is a Portuguese cement company, present in eight countries, which completed 90 years in 2020. In 2022, it started a new strategic cycle, *Ambition 2025 - Sustainable Growth*, in which it scores sustainability as the organisation's focus for the coming years. According to Secil's CEO, Otmar Hübscher, at Secil "the theme of sustainability has gained, in recent years, a strong preponderance, and it is in this perspective that Secil will anchor its growth" (Secil, 2022, p. 7). Sustainability is one of the strategic pillars of the Group, and its goal is "To be recognised as a responsible and sustainable company by 2025, committed to decarbonisation by 2050".

Beyond the environment, the Group intends to move in this cycle towards a more holistic approach to sustainability, which is to meet the needs of

the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Fontaine, 2013). To do this, it has been using the ESG framework. ESG stands for environment, social, and governance, and has become a key indicator of management competence, risk management, and non-financial performance that is being demanded by the financial market for listed companies and is also a best practice to be adopted by organisations that are not listed (Galbreath, 2012). To achieve this goal, the following objectives are outlined:

1. Assess Secil's sustainability narrative in the intended public image through the advertising messages disclosed between January 2020 and February 2022.
2. Assess Secil's media image in Portugal between January 2020 and February 2022.
3. Compare Secil's media image with the intended public image.

Methodologically, the work employs content analysis based on the framing theory (Entman, 1993) and Hallahan's (1999) attributes model. The quantitative method is employed through content analysis of journalistic and advertising pieces published about Secil in the Portuguese media between January 2020 and February 2022. This period encompasses the Sustainability Report 2020-2021, during which the company places a particular emphasis on sustainability. Given that sustainability is the framework desired by the Secil Group, it was deemed appropriate to include it as a registration category in the analysis grid. The acronym ESG, which stands for environmental, social, and governance, was used to identify the priorities highlighted by the Group in its Sustainability Report 2020 and 2021. The environment, social, and governance attributes were then analysed in the journalistic and advertising pieces about Secil, which were identified as registration units.

Intended image and media image: Organisations in the public sphere

This section will proceed to present the theoretical framework. Firstly, the importance of an organisation's image for its reputation will be addressed. Subsequently, the function of the media in developing an organisation's reputation and the role of the PR professional in formulating the organisation's narrative for creating its desired image and in the relationship with the media will be discussed. Prior to presenting the theoretical framework of this article, an overview of framing and the attributes model is provided, along with a discussion of the concept of greenwashing.

The image's relevance for organisations

The concept of organisational image is not consensual among researchers and is often treated as synonymous with reputation (e.g., Gilpin, 2010; Massey, 2016; Ravasi, 2016). For some authors, the image of an organisation is the perception, the impression created in the stakeholders' minds (e.g., Dowling, 1986; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). For others, it is what the organisation's members think is the perception of external stakeholders (e.g., Brown et al., 2006; Dutton et al., 1994), and results from the relationship between the organisation and stakeholders (e.g., Brown et al., 2006; Cornelissen et al., 2007; Frandsen, 2017; Gilpin, 2010). Frandsen (2017), for example, says that organisational image exists from interactions between the sender (organisation) and the receiver (stakeholder), being the product of the "communicated image" and the "felt image" (p. 1796). Brown et al. (2006) consider that external perception has more to do with reputation and thus define an organisational image as the combination of intended image [what the organisation communicates and how it structures engagement with stakeholders (Cornelissen et al., 2007)] and interpreted image [how members of the organisation think external stakeholders see the organisation (Brown et al., 2006)]. Organisational image, thus, results from the duality between the image projected by the organisation itself and the stakeholders' perception of the organisation (Massey, 2016). For Coslada-Diaz (2002), it is the overall result of personal apprehension of an organisation's rational and emotional attributes.

Organisational image is considered vital to building and managing the relationship between stakeholders and achieving legitimacy (Frandsen, 2017), a process of social construction in which the organisation adapts its self-expressions to meet collective expectations (Gilpin, 2010). Organisational image is the basis of stakeholder connection (Boros, 2009). For this reason, its management is often driven by an ambition to leave a consistent image in the minds of stakeholders (Frandsen, 2017). Organisations that do not manage their organisational image are more susceptible to failure (Gilpin, 2010; Massey, 2016), which has consequences for their identity and reputation.

The organisational identity is influenced by organisational image. Organisational identity is the result of the combination of organisational culture (tacit organisational understandings/beliefs, values, and assumptions that contextualise efforts to create meaning) and the image of stakeholders (Hatch & Schultz, 2002, p. 1004). Identity is connected to image and culture through four processes, according to Hatch & Schultz: identity mirrors the image others have about the organisation (mirroring); identity is reflected in cultural understanding (reflection); culture becomes known, is expressed, through identity (expression); and identity leaves an impression on others (impression).

Reputation is an external consequence, as it is also influenced by organisational image. Reputation is something more intangible and out of control (Boros, 2009); it is the overall assessment of external stakeholders based on several factors over time: how the organisation presents itself, how stakeholders perceive it, and how it is represented by the media (Brown et al., 2006; Gilpin, 2010; Massey, 2016). For Massey (2016), reputation and image are dynamic constructs that share interdependent relationships through the constant exchange between the organisation and its stakeholders.

In this sense, organisations, with the contribution of PR professionals, engage in a series of communication activities to project a distinct, favourable, and coherent organisational image to customers, employees, communities, and the general public (Frandsen, 2017). One such activity, which will be

examined in greater detail in the following section, is the relationship between PR professionals and journalists. The objective of this relationship is to garner positive media attention.

The media's relevance for organisational image

One of the most traditional tactics of PR professionals to convey the message of the intended organisational image to many stakeholders and thus manage reputation is through good relations with media journalists (Gilpin, 2010). Even though technological development has transformed how people inform and communicate, the media remains a critical component in a society's public information system. Oliver (2010) points out five factors that emphasise the importance of the media in the construction of social reality: the media hold and distribute information, serve as an arena for discussion of issues of public interest, contribute to the construction of social reality, confer fame on personalities and reinforce ethical standards and social responsibility. Fortunato (2000) emphasises the power of the media in two dimensions: the influence of the public and the ability to select and frame messages. Being one of the autonomous fields of today's societies (Rodrigues, 1988), the media have the ideal of being the watchdogs of political and economic powers. They are the guardians of democracy, the informers of the public, and a means of socialisation (Sebastião, 2021). In this context of information fragmentation in the digital environment, journalists from the media stand out for their credibility, as they are regulated and follow ethical and deontological precepts, being at the centre of the public sphere. The public sphere is the space where public opinion is formed through interaction, discussion, and information (Habermas et al., 1974).

In the corporate field, journalists working in the media are stakeholders with whom an organisation needs to interact, as they allow it to position itself in the public arena on issues of interest that affect it (Sebastião, 2021). The media are also an essential means for the success of an organisation's communication strategies, as through them, organisations can influence legislators, publicise actions that impact their audiences, and comply with

legal and transparency obligations (Zoch & Molleda, 2009). In this sense, one of the PR specialisations most present in organisations is that of a press officer or a media officer. A good relationship with the media provides advantages for the organisation. As a source of information for journalists, the PR professional ensures the provision of correct and controlled information, giving the organisation a voice to clarify issues that may arise. As an analyst of what is disseminated by the media, this professional can translate the internal implications of external facts and news to the organisation (Sebastião, 2021). According to Fortunato (2000), PR professionals have an essential role in selecting and framing the media agenda, as they have the power to influence the media and must act as advocates for the organisation they represent.

Organisations can also be present in the media through advertising, a space paid for by the organisation, which, in addition to informing audiences about products and services, can disseminate messages about the organisation and its values. Advertising is a controlled space for awareness and favourability (Oliver, 2010), as the organisation has the final word about the message. In advertising contracting, there is no intermediation by the journalist, and they do not add other points of view. The credibility of advertising versus publishing news in the editorial space has been the subject of numerous studies. Several researchers believe that people perceive editorial content more positively than advertising because the former is more credible (Belch & Belch, 2004; Choi & Park, 2011). Vercic et al. (2008), however, went in the opposite direction. Motivated by the lack of empirical evidence that, in the public's perception, editorial content is more credible than advertising content, they conducted an experimental study and concluded that editorial content is not more credible than advertising content.

For this reason, they recommend a holistic and integrated approach to communication and marketing actions, not prioritising one type of content over another but using both in a complementary way. Suppose the PR practitioner maintains a mutually beneficial relationship with journalists. In

that case, they will ensure that the content of the editorial narrative, constructed in the uncontrolled environment of journalism, is the same as the advertising narrative.

The media image can be seen as a generator of organisational image and a driver of the interpreted image. The media image is one of the ways of building the organisational image since the media are the primary mediators of reality for all citizens (Coslada-Diaz, 2002). By selecting and highlighting topics, the media condition the general public's perception of an organisation, as they influence the creation of the image of this organisation (Sebastião, 2016). However, the media image will not be the only component in the organisational image, as the media influences it, but not only (Coslada-Diaz, 2002). The media image will also influence the interpreted image since the media coverage of an organisation's actions can induce the members of this organisation to review the actions (Ravasi, 2016). In the case of Secil, it is essential to know how the organisation is represented in the media to understand whether the intended image is aligned with what is portrayed by the media.

The issue of sustainability in general, and the environment in particular, is on the media agenda, as public opinion is attentive to the issue of climate change (Anderson et al., 2017). However, it is important to note that regarding sustainability, namely climate change, there is an additional challenge regarding public trust in organisations and the media. Among the causes of this mistrust is the concept of greenwashing, discussed in the next subpoint.

Organisations and greenwashing

Recent studies demonstrate that organisations and the media must be better trusted regarding sustainability and climate change. The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: Trust and Climate Change results, which surveyed 14,000 people in 14 countries, show that the public does not trust journalists, government leaders, and the CEOs of organisations as reliable spokespeople to tell the truth about climate change (Edelman, 2022). Regarding trust in whether they are doing the right thing to address climate

change, respondents' perception of government, organisations and the media is neutral (neither trust nor distrust). In addition, 59% said there is a lack of news about climate change solutions in the media, and 60% admitted that it was difficult to find reliable information on the subject (Edelman, 2022).

Among the causes of this mistrust is the concept of greenwashing. Greenwashing "is an umbrella term for a variety of misleading communications and practices that intentionally or not induce false positive perceptions of an organisation's environmental performance" (Nemes et al., 2022, p.6). Born in 1986 by Jay Westervelt - with a paper about towel reuse in the hospitality industry (Watson, 2016) -, the concept has already been widely discussed by various authors (e.g. de Freitas Netto, 2020), who have focused on the aspect of positive communication of environmental performance despite poor environmental performance (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), on symbolic environmental protection behaviours to mask no environmental protection behaviours and also disclosing disinformation about environmental practices (Baum, 2012). Lyon and Maxwell (2011) emphasised the selective aspect of the concept, known as selective disclosure. For the authors, greenwashing is not necessarily the dissemination of false information. It could be the disclosure of positive data on an organisation's social and environmental performance and the retention of harmful data on these dimensions.

Whatever the type or form of greenwashing, the ultimate goal will be related to legitimacy (e.g. de Freitas Netto, 2020; Marquis et al., 2016; Seele & Gatti, 2015). In this sense, several actors developed greenwashing frameworks to avoid greenwashing practices (Nemes et al., 2022). Nemes et al. (2022) developed a framework to assess greenwashing based on three categories organisations should consider when communicating environmental initiatives: it must be real and impactful (1); it must be aligned within the organisation and checked by credible third parties (2); communication must be clear and transparent (3) (Nemes et al., 2022, p.7). In the next subpoint, the role of PR in constructing the intentional image and framing as the theoretical framework of this article is addressed.

Framing the intended image and the media image

Framing is a theoretical framework to verify how the media frames Secil's intended public image in Portugal. Framing arises from the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), for which the media establishes the issues the general public should consider. It is a theoretical resource associated with the criteria and variables chosen by journalists to present the news. For Hallahan (2011), framing includes or excludes political and social life aspects to simplify the message and, consequently, condition perceptions. This theoretical resource originated in the mass communication theories, started to be used in PR studies because professionals in this area are responsible for building the narrative of organisations.

According to Entman (1993), framing involves selecting and salience of some aspects of perceived reality to promote a definition of a problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993, p. 55). Hallahan (1999) defines seven framing models: situation, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility and news (Table 1).

Table 1 - The seven framing models:

Model	Definition
Situations	Provides a framework for examining the communication of relationships between individuals in everyday life situations. Applies to analysing discourse, negotiation processes, among others.
Attributes	The aim is to emphasise some characteristics of objects and people over others to influence information processing with focal attributes.
Choices	The positive (gains) and negative (losses) alternatives of uncertain situations are presented. It is assumed that people take more risks to avoid losses.
Actions	It persuades the receiver to act to achieve a desired goal. People are influenced by how alternatives are presented (positive or negative).

Issues	Different parties with different viewpoints explain Social problems and disputes, which compete to be chosen as the preferred reason.
Responsibility	Focuses on the causes attributed to particular problems and situations. People tend to maximise benefits and minimise blame. They prefer attributing personal actions as causes rather than systemic societal problems.
News	Use familiar and culturally established themes to convey actions about a situation. Sources compete for their favourite framing.

Source: adapted from Hallahan, 1999, p.210

In this article, a case study is presented which employs the attributes model to elucidate the relative emphasis placed on specific characteristics of objects and people. The selection of a subject provides a framework for interpretation (Sebastião, 2016). The following section presents the Secil Group, which serves as the case study for this article.

The Secil Group

The Secil Group is a cement organisation, part of an industry responsible for 7% of global CO₂ emissions (GCCA, 2021). The company operates in eight countries: Portugal, Tunisia, Angola, Lebanon, Brazil, Cape Verde, Spain, and the Netherlands. Of Portuguese origin, the Group has 65% of its results dependent on Portugal, its primary market, and where it has the most employees - 44% of 2.3 thousand employees (Secil, 2022, p. 13). It is also the country where the brand is best known, with the second largest market share, behind competitor Cimpor. In 2022, it began a new strategic cycle, Ambition 2025 - Sustainable Growth, which points to sustainability as the organisation's focus for the coming years, as one of the Group's strategic pillars, having the objective of being "recognised as a responsible and sustainable company by 2025, committed to decarbonisation by 2050" (Secil, 2022, p. 13). In 2022, the company adopted the ESG framing to measure

its sustainability performance. According to Secil's CEO, Otmar Hübscher, at Secil "the issue of sustainability has gained a strong preponderance in recent years, and it is in this perspective that Secil will anchor its growth" (Secil, 2022, p. 7).

The company highlights on its Portuguese website homepage (<https://www.secil-group.com/pt/Home>) some sustainability initiatives related to the social dimension (the centenary of one of its plants and the community impact; the Secil's award to recognise the work of Portuguese architects and engineers; and the cement museum), and the environmental dimension. Regarding the environment, the most challenging topic for Secil as its activity depends on causing environmental implications, two innovative projects are emphasised: the Clean Cement Line (CCL) and the Verdi Zero Concrete. To present CCL, Secil admits its environmental impact: "We want to minimise the impact of our operations by increasing energy efficiency in facilities and equipment and by using alternative fuels". This project includes four R&D sub-projects that aim to eliminate the dependence on fossil fuels, increase energy efficiency, produce electricity itself, integrate the digitalisation process, and reduce by 20% the CO₂ emissions. The Verdi Zero Concrete is the first carbon-neutral concrete offered in the Portuguese market, consisting, beyond having less carbon intensity, in compensating the remaining emissions. The product is certified by Climate Impact Partners.

Both projects are happening just in Portugal because, in environmental terms, the challenge in Europe is more significant than in the other countries where Secil is present. According to the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2021), Secil must move to carbon-neutral concrete by 2050. Beyond the environment, the Group aims to move in this cycle towards a more holistic approach to sustainability (Fontaine, 2013) and adopted the ESG methodology (Galbreath, 2012).

Methodological options

In order to achieve the overarching aim of this article, namely to gain insight into how the Secil Group presents its public image, the following objectives were set out to achieve the research aims: the first objective is to assess the public image that Secil intends to convey through the advertising messages broadcast between January 2020 and February 2022. The second objective is to evaluate Secil's media image in Portugal between January 2020 and February 2022. The third objective is to compare Secil's media image with the intended public image.

In order to fulfil these specific objectives, the theoretical framework of framing, as represented by the attributes model, is employed. In light of the fact that sustainability represents the framework espoused by the Secil Group, it will be treated as a registration category in the analysis grid. The environmental, social, and governance (ESG) priorities highlighted by the Group in its 2020-2021 Sustainability Report will be the attributes subjected to analysis in the journalistic and advertising pieces about Secil and identified as registration units (Table 2). The quantitative method is employed through the content analysis of journalistic and advertising pieces published about Secil in the Portuguese media between January 2020 and February 2022. Content analysis allows for the identification of patterns and trends. It is a summary and quantitative analysis of messages that adheres to the standards of the scientific method and is not limited to the context in which the messages are created (Neuendorf, 2017). The period in question was selected on the grounds that it encompasses both the 2020-2021 Sustainability Report and the formal inauguration of the new strategic cycle, within which sustainability constitutes one of the strategic pillars.

Table 2 - Model for analysing the sustainability framework and ESG attributes

Framework (category of analysis)	Attributes (registration units)	Definition
Sustainability (Journalistic and advertising pieces that mention sustainability)	Environment	Journalistic and advertising pieces about initiatives to preserve the environment, mitigate environmental damage, or about actual or possible environmental damage.
	Social	Journalistic and advertising pieces about the relationship with employees, customers, communities, suppliers, and stakeholders in general.
	Governance	Journalistic and advertising pieces about the transparency of the organisation's management, and disclosure of initiatives that demonstrate integrity and ethical concerns.

Source: self-elaboration.

In this article, Secil's clipping service in Portugal is used as a starting point for the definition of the analysis corpus. Clipping is the research, selection, collection, and systematisation of journalistic and or advertising texts about an organisation published in the media (Sebastião, 2021). Secil hires the clipping from a company that makes it available on the ClipQuick Media Centre digital platform. All the journalistic and advertising pieces that mentioned Secil published in the press, television, radio, and internet were selected. Thus, the analysis corpus comprises 240 items, 201 journalistic pieces, and 39 advertising pieces, including institutional and product promotion pieces.

Once the definition of the corpus had been established, the next step was to proceed with the floating reading, which means "establishing contact with the documents to be analysed and getting to know the text by letting ourselves be invaded by impressions and orientations" (Bardin, 2011, p. 126). This step contributed to building the following hypotheses:

- H1. Secil's desired image is that of a sustainable organisation (objective 1).
- H2. Secil's advertisements emphasise product quality (objective 1).
- H3. The social attribute guarantees Secil a media image of an organisation connected to stakeholders (objective 2).
- H4. Secil's media image in Portugal is that of a polluting organisation (objective 2).
- H5. The sustainability framework predominates in environmental matters (objective 3).

These hypotheses and the floating reading determined the elaboration of the analysis grid, with the definition of the registration categories and units of analysis, which are detailed in Table 3:

Table 3 - Register categories, units of analysis, coding clues, and relation with the hypotheses:

Category of analysis	Units of analysis and coding tracks	Hypotheses
Date	Day, month, and year of publication.	
Medium	Newspaper (print or online), news portal, television (television or online), radio (radio or online), magazine (print and online).	
Reach	Reach of the media outlet: regional, national or international.	
General or specialised:	Media outlet is either generalist (dealing with all subjects of interest) or specialised in a particular subject (e.g. the construction sector).	
Sustainability framework:	Because it is relevant in Secil's strategic cycle and is very prominent on the institutional website, sustainability is evident as the framework the organisation intends to integrate into its narrative. Thus, the aim is to verify whether the corpus of analysis includes the issue of sustainability.	H3 H4
Attributes	Identify whether the pieces are framed within one of the attributes of the ESG acronym: environment, social and governance.	H1 H2 H5

Category of analysis	Units of analysis and coding tracks	Hypotheses
Main subject and secondary subject	The primary and secondary subjects were considered separate registration categories. Not all news items had a secondary subject.	
Content type	Journalistic or advertising.	
Publication name	Name of the media outlet.	
Focus:	<p>Positive focus (an initiative of the organisation is highlighted; the organisation is not criticized or its point of view challenged; the organisation is invited to comment on an issue), negative (when the organisation's point of view is challenged, when stakeholders criticize an initiative of the organisation) or neutral (news about the holding company that owns Secil; news about the sale or acquisition of businesses in which the other party (buyer or seller) is the main focus).</p>	

Source: self-elaboration.

Once the news items had been systematised and classified, content analysis was carried out. A descriptive statistical analysis of the advertising and news items was conducted, first by frequency and then by associations, using Pearson's chi-square tests. Although the statistical associations were found to be insignificant ($p > 0.05$), the cross-section of variables was presented in order to facilitate an understanding of their distribution. The results are presented in the following section.

Results

Between January 2020 and February 2022, 201 journalistic pieces and 39 advertising pieces (N=240) published in the press, television, radio, and internet that mentioned Secil in the clipping service contracted by the company were selected. Of the total, 2020 concentrates 56.7% of the cases, 2021 has 32.9% and 2022 has 10.4%. The medium that published the most news was the newspaper (38.3%), followed by the magazine (20.4%), the online portal (19.2%), television (12.5%), radio (8.3%), and news aggregator (1.3%). Regarding reach, 66.1% were published in national media, 30.4% in regional media, 2.5% in international media; 67.9% in general media and 12.9% in

specialised media. *O Setubalense* was the media outlet with the most cases (24), followed by *Sem Mais Jornal* (10), both newspapers from the Setúbal region, where Secil has its main cement plant, and TSF radio (9), with national reach.

Of the total sample, 24% are framed with sustainability (58 pieces): 43 are journalistic and 15 are advertising. Regarding ESG attributes, the environment is the one that stands out the most, with 38.3% of the cases (Graph 1). This attribute included all journalistic and advertising pieces whose central theme was related to the implications for biodiversity caused by the production process or the cement company’s actions to mitigate these implications. Social was the second most prominent attribute (31.6%). Among several subjects, such as customer, community and employee relations, pandemic, and the Secil Group’s 90th anniversary, as well as others, the Secil Architecture Award was the one that obtained the most cases, being the main subject of this attribute (20.8%). The governance attribute was the least highlighted, with only one case being framed, a journalistic piece on Semapa’s results in which it explained and detailed the results of the holding by its companies, including Secil. Seventy-one items that did not have ESG attributes as their main subject were classified according to the primary subject: economy (industry performance, acquisition or sale of businesses, the construction market, among others), product (news about Secil concrete, mortars, or urban rehabilitation) and innovation (new digitalisation processes and innovative initiatives of the organisation).

Table 4 - Frequency of Attributes in Communication Pieces

Attribute	Frequency
Environment	92
Social	76
Governance	1
Economy	30
Product	22
Innovation	19

Note: N=240.

The following subsections present the results according to specific objectives and associated hypotheses.

The intended image

Given the specific objective 1 – to assess the public image intended by Secil through the advertising messages broadcast between January 2020 and February 2022 –, two hypotheses were formulated: Secil's intended image is that of a sustainable organisation (h1), and Secil's advertisements emphasise product quality (h2). To understand the intended image, the advertising pieces published by Secil in the media were analysed. Seventeen out of 39 items were traditional adverts, and 22 were classified as branded content, i.e., news-like informative pieces whose content was created by the company, such as the advantages of a product or a new project, among others.

Regarding the h1, it can be identified the company's effort to present its commitment to mitigate the environmental implications. A five-page colour supplement published in *Sem Mais Jornal* on July 30 2021, exemplifies this effort. The supplement presents the Clean Cement Line (CCL) project, making the Outão plant one of the most sustainable in Europe. It also explains the research, development, and innovation project with investments of 86 million euros. On the same day, a full-page advert about the project was published in the newspaper *O Setubalense*. However, both newspapers have regional distribution, reaching not all of the country's population, only the community nearby the plant.

Concerning sustainability's frame presence, it is constantly recognised in the advertising pieces in 2020 (6), 2021 (5), and 2022 (4). However, there are more items without framing (24) than with (15). The sustainability frame and the ESG attributes are more identified in the institutional pieces: nine environmental pieces were identified, all framing sustainability. Regarding the social attribute, several themes were grouped: the Group's 90th anniversary (2), the relationship with customers (2), the Secil Architecture Award (2), and a piece on the pandemic. Only the two referring to the Group's anniversary have the sustainability frame. No items were framed

in the governance attribute since no advertising pieces discuss corporate governance (Table 5).

Regarding the h2, the marketing items analysed usually do not frame sustainability – just two out of 21 frame sustainability. The other 19 items, generally published in specialised media (16), are descriptive and seek to highlight the technical attributes and quality of the products.

Table 5: The framing of sustainability by attributes in advertising

Topic	Frame Sustainability	Don't Frame Sustainability
Environment	9	0
Social	2	5
Governance	0	0
Product	2	19
Innovation	2	0

N=39

Previous results do not confirm h1 - Secil's intended image is that of a sustainable organisation – and confirm h2 - Secil's advertisements emphasise product quality. On the one hand, the sustainability frame is present in Secil's advertising pieces, and the content shows the company's effort to mitigate environmental implications. On the other hand, the sustainability frame is present in less than half of items (15 out of 39), confined to institutional pieces about the environmental attribute. The marketing pieces describe the technical attributes and quality of the products, reinforcing the not confirmation of h1 and the confirmation of h2.

The following subsection presents the results concerning specific objective 2 and the associated hypothesis.

The media image

Given the specific objective 2 – to assess Secil's media image in Portugal between January 2020 and February 2022 –, two hypotheses were

formulated: the social attribute guarantees Secil a media image of an organisation connected to stakeholders (h3), and Secil’s media image in Portugal is that of a polluting organisation (h4). The two facts that concentrated the most significant news items (50.7% of the total – 102 out of 201) were published in 2020 and are related to the hypothesis formulated for specific objective 2: the Secil Architecture Awards, the social attribute (h3), and the news about a possible quarry expansion in Serra da Arrábida, the environmental attribute (h4) (Table 6).

Table 6 - Frequency of Communication Topics by Month

Month	Social: Secil’s Award	Environment: Quarry Expansion
January	44	
September		49
October		9

N=102

Regarding the h3, in January 2020, 44 news pieces had as their main subject the announcement of the winners of the Secil Architecture Award, a biannual award held by Secil in Portugal since 1992. The news pieces about the Secil Architecture Award were classified with the social attribute since this is a stakeholder relations initiative, such as the community of architects and university students. It was the predominant subject published under the social attribute (48 out of 69 items: other four items about this subject were published after 2020). Secil’s Award had significant regional (24) and national (20) visibility. In the Azores region, 8 out of 9 news items that mentioned Secil between 2020 and 2022 were about the Secil Architecture Award, whose winning work was built in the region. The same occurred in the Centre and North of the country (13 items), where a finalist from the Faculty of Architecture of Coimbra, born in Aveiro, won in the university category, being cited in at least four regional newspapers. Regarding the medium (Table 7), the subject was more covered in printed newspapers (19) and online portals (16) than on radio (5) and television (1).

Table 7 - Secil architecture award by medium in 2020

Media Type	Number of Items
Newspaper	19
Website	16
TV	1
Radio	5
Magazine	3

N=44

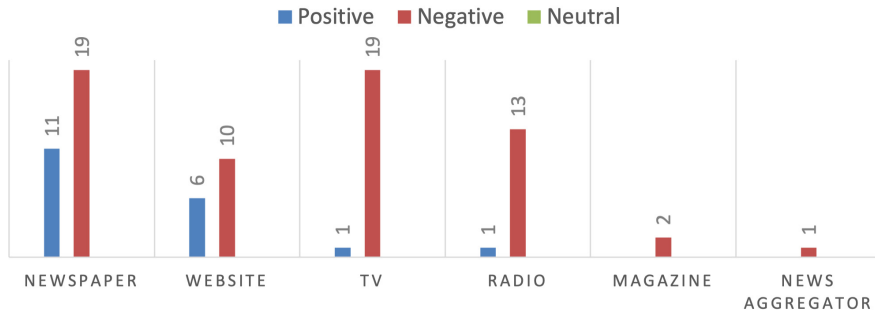
Beyond the sustainability frame and the ESG attributes, the item's focus were analysed – positive, negative, or neutral. In pieces framed with a positive focus, an initiative of the organisation was highlighted without criticism, or when the organisation was heard on another topic as an expert on the subject. A negative focus is understood as items in which the organisation's point of view is contested or when an organisation's initiative is criticised. The pieces in which Secil is mentioned but is not the main focus of the news or do not interfere with it are considered neutral (e.g., the Angolan government announces that it will privatise several companies, and, in the extensive list of these companies, there is a company in which the government and Secil are partners). When analysing the items framed with the social attribute, it was found that most had a positive focus (64 out of 69). However, just one framed sustainability (Table 8).

Table 8 - The sustainability framework, the ESG attributes and the news focus

Attributes & Focus	Frame sustainability	Don't frame sustainability	Total
Environment	24	59	83
Positive	18	1	19
Negative	6	58	64
Social	1	68	69
Positive	1	63	64
Negative	0	5	5
Governance	0	1	1
Neutral	0	1	1
Economy	6	24	30
Positive	6	18	24
Negative	0	2	2
Neutral	0	4	4
Product	1	0	1
Positive	1	0	1
Innovation	11	6	17
Positive	11	6	17

N=201

Concerning the h4, the environment is the ESG's attribute most prominent in the media items (83 out of 201), and the negative focus is predominant (64 out of 83) (Graph 5). Nevertheless, when the focus is positive (19), most items frame sustainability (18 of the 24 news items that mention sustainability are positive).



Graph 1 - The environment's attribute focus in the media

N=201

Two subjects can be mentioned as environment attribute examples published by the media. First, the news about the Outão plant's quarry expansion study Secil was first published by the newspaper *O Público* on September 23 2020 and it was echoed another 57 times between September and October in all media: television (17), newspaper (15), radio (13), and online portal (10) had the highest number of cases (Table 9). In terms of reach, the most prominent was national (46). In 2020, the environment had 60 items published, and only three were not about the quarry's expansion. The subject was the media's attention because the Outão plant is in the Serra da Arrábida National Park. The plant was built in 1904 before the region was classified as a national park in 1976. The other three items, published in September 2020, dealt with Secil's commitment to decarbonising concrete by 2050. Only the news about Secil's commitment had the sustainability framework.

Table 9 - Quarry expansion by medium in 2020

Media Type	Number of Items
Website	10
TV	17
Radio	13
Magazine	3
News Aggregators	1

Note: This table outlines

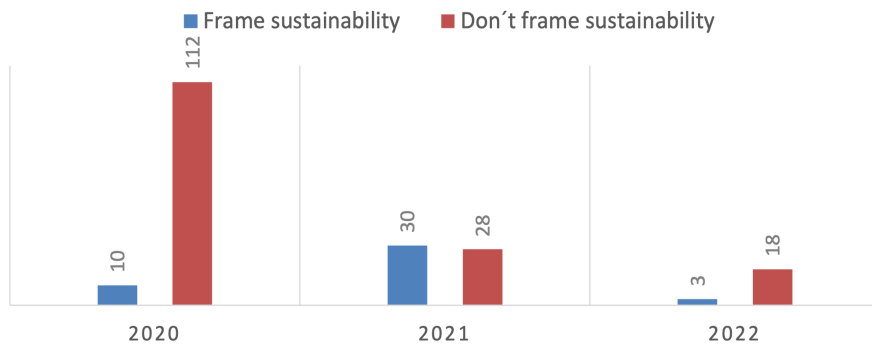
N=58

Second, in 2021, Secil's €86 million investment announcement to turn the Outão plant one of the most sustainable in Europe was mentioned 14 times by the media. The first piece was published in the online and print versions by the newspaper *Expresso Economia* on April 23, 2021, with a cover call and a full-page colour piece. The newspaper *Jornal Económico* published a two-page interview with the Group's CEO, Otmar Hübscher (Figure 1). As mentioned in the previous sub-section, Secil also published the announcement as advertising pieces in *O Setubalense* and *Sem Mais Jornal*, both regional publications. All the pieces about this subject had a sustainability framing with a positive focus. This sustainable initiative announcement fulfils the main requirements used by Nemes et al. (2022) to define if a communication action is or not greenwashing: it is real and impactful (86€ million investment in its plant to reduce 20% CO2 emissions); aligned with the organisation business (it is related to cement production); checked by third parties (it was a Portugal 2020 project, recognised by the Portuguese authorities); and it is being communicated clearly and transparently (Portugal 2020 has several requirements regarding the communication and transparency of information).



Figure 1. News clippings on investment to make the plant more sustainable. Source: self-elaboration

From 2021 onwards, with the impetus of Outão’s plant investment announcement, the sustainability framework gained prominence in journalistic pieces. In 2021, 30 items were framed with sustainability, surpassing the cases that were not framed (28). In 2020, only 10 of the 122 items had this framing (Graph 2). Besides that, it is possible to identify that the topic of sustainability in general, and the environment in particular, is integrated into the media agenda since public opinion is attentive to the issue of climate change (Anderson et al., 2017).



Graph 2 - Evolution of the sustainability framework.

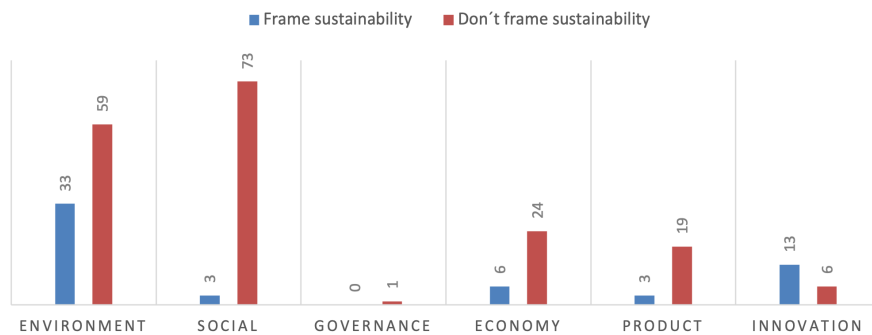
N=201

Previous results do confirm the h3 and h4 hypotheses. The social attribute guarantees Secil a media image of an organisation connected to stakeholders (h3) as it is the second ESG attribute most mentioned by the media (69) and because it has a predominant positive focus (63). However, this ESG attribute is not framed with sustainability (just one did). The h4, Secil's media image in Portugal is that of a polluting organisation, can be confirmed by the predominance of the environment attribute in the media (83 out of 201) with negative focus (64 and 83). For example, the quarry's expansion media coverage reinforcing its pollution activities was mentioned 58 times, and the CCL project announcement media coverage highlighting its investment to be more sustainable was mentioned 14 times. On top of that, when Secil is mentioned by television and radio, the news are predominantly negative about the environment attribute. Twenty six news about Secil were broadcast on television channels in the period analysed, 20 were about the environment, and 19 had a negative focus. Twenty news items about Secil were broadcast on radio channels in the period analysed, 14 were about the environment, and 13 had a negative focus.

The following sub-section parallels Secil's intended image with the media image to confirm the h5: the sustainability framework predominates in environmental matters.

Paralleling intended and media images

Given the specific objective 3 – compare Secil’s media image with the intended public image –, one hypothesis was formulated: the sustainability framework predominates in environmental matters (h5). Of the total sample (N=240), 24% are framed with sustainability (58 pieces): 43 are journalistic items and 15 are advertising items. Less than 30% of the pieces are framed with sustainability. The environment, the ESG attribute most mentioned in advertising pieces (9 out of 39) and media pieces (83 out of 201), is also the attributed most framed with sustainability (33 out of 92). Social is the second, with 3 items, and governance had just one mention, not framed (Graph 3).



Graph 3 – The sustainability framework predominates in environmental matters
N=201

When the pieces analysed have other subjects than ESG attributes, it was possible to identify that innovation is a subject that advertising pieces (2) and journalistic pieces (11) frequently frame sustainability. Innovation was the only subject in the number of pieces framing sustainability superior to those not framing sustainability. However, as the environment attribute was framed with sustainability 33 times, it is possible to confirm h5: the sustainability framework predominates in environmental matters.

Results discussion

Despite being present in the narrative highlighted on the organisation's website and the 2020-2021 Sustainability Report, when analysing its narrative in the media, it is not possible to affirm that the Secil Group's intended image is a sustainable organisation (h1). The sustainability framing was identified in only 58 of the 240 items (43 journalistic pieces and 15 advertising pieces). In the controlled field of advertising, sustainability is the predominant narrative only in institutional pieces about the environmental attribute - institutional pieces about other attributes and marketing pieces do not frame sustainability. By not incorporating the sustainability narrative in all advertising pieces (no matter what the main subject is), Secil does not follow Vercic et al. (2008) recommendation of having a holistic and integrated approach to communication actions and misses out on the opportunity to disseminate information about the organisation and its values through advertisement (Oliver, 2010). Regarding the advertising pieces about products (19 out of 24), they usually focus on their quality and description (h2). Thus, marketing pieces not framing sustainability is difficult for Secil's intended image of a sustainable organisation.

The lack of a sustainability framework is also noticeable in the advertising and journalistic items about Secil with subjects on social attribute. One example is the Secil Architecture Award. As a PR tool to generate media coverage (Sebastião, 2021) and thus leverage the intended image, the awards should integrate the sustainability narrative and promote sustainability by, for example, creating a category to reward sustainable works. The two advertising pieces about the award did not have the sustainability framework, neither the 48 journalistic pieces about the award. The social attribute, the second most present attribute in the journalistic pieces (69 items), was only behind the environmental attribute (83 items). However, only one of the pieces of the social attribute frames sustainability. As 64 of the 69 journalistic pieces have a positive focus, it is possible to affirm that the social attribute guarantees Secil a media image of an organisation that relates to stakeholders (h3). Suppose this positive focus can come from PR

influencing the journalists and advocating for the organisation (Fortunato, 2000). Thus, Secil has an excellent opportunity to frame the social attribute with sustainability to reinforce a sustainable organisation's narrative and intended image. It should also be noted that, in the entire analysis corpus, only one news item was considered within the governance attribute. It is a topic that the Group has yet to work on in the media agenda or advertising by choosing the ESG framework to position sustainability. If the intended image – what organisations want others to think about – results from the organisation's communication actions (Villafañe, 1999), those communication actions regarding media should happen with an integrated approach with both PR and marketing actions (Vercic et al., 2008).

Regarding the h4, Secil's media image in Portugal is that of a polluting organisation, it can be confirmed through several pieces of evidence. First, the environment attribute is the main subject of advertising and advertising pieces mentioning Secil (92 out of 240). The company also wants to show its efforts to mitigate environmental implications, as 9 of 35 advertising pieces are about the environment attribute. Second, most news about the environmental attribute has a negative focus. Fourth, television and radio channels mention Secil only when there is negative news about the environment attribute. Fourth, the impact of news involving environmental damage (e.g., the quarry case) is more significant than good news regarding sustainability (e.g., investment announcement). These results show, on the one hand, that sustainability, environment, and climate change are on the media agenda (Anderson et al., 2017). On the other hand, they also show that the media is more the watchdogs of political and economic powers (Rodrigues, 1988) than presenting solutions to mitigate climate change (Edelman, 2022).

Nevertheless, with the investment announcement in the Outão plant, which does not seem to be greenwashing according to Nemes et al. (2022) requirements, it is possible to notice the sustainability framework with a positive focus more present in the journalistic pieces. In 2021, 30 journalistic pieces framed sustainability, surpassing the cases that did not (28). The problem is that, as seen in the previous results, the sustainability frame appears just

when the subject is the environment attribute (h5). In this sense, a company that depends on extracting natural resources to operate and whose environmental actions are always supervised and scrutinised (Zuo et al., 2012) has an additional challenge in being perceived as a sustainable company. If the sustainability narrative is confined to the environmental aspect, precisely where it is weakest, this challenge becomes even more difficult. Integrating the sustainability narrative with the other ESG attributes and all its communication actions could help to balance the narrative.

Despite Secil's efforts to frame itself as a sustainable organisation, a broader reflection is necessary to evaluate whether these initiatives sufficiently address the scale of the environmental challenges posed by the cement industry. While projects like the Clean Cement Line and Verdi Zero Concrete signify progress, they do not fully mitigate the industry's systemic impact on biodiversity, carbon emissions, and resource extraction. The narrow focus on environmental dimensions risks overlooking the interconnected social and governance aspects of sustainability, creating a fragmented narrative.

Moreover, the absence of sustainability framing in non-environmental initiatives, such as the Secil Architecture Award, highlights an inconsistency that may undermine the company's broader sustainability claims. This lack of integration across ESG dimensions, coupled with the cement industry's inherent challenges, could lead stakeholders to question the authenticity of Secil's sustainability commitments. To avoid the perception of greenwashing, Secil must ensure that its initiatives are not only impactful and well-communicated but also embedded within a unified, holistic sustainability strategy that encompasses all ESG dimensions.

By addressing these gaps, Secil can transition from tactical improvements to transformative leadership within the industry, demonstrating a genuine commitment to sustainability that resonates with stakeholders and aligns with the pressing demands of global environmental and social governance challenges.

Conclusion

An organisation that is reliant on the extraction of natural resources and the emission of greenhouse gases is confronted with intrinsic challenges in maintaining its legitimacy and a licence to operate. While such industries provide economic benefits, such as job creation, it is becoming increasingly evident that communities willing to tolerate nearby operations that emit CO₂, generate waste, and impact biodiversity are few and far between. However, these companies do not exist for the sole purpose of polluting; rather, their purpose is to address a societal need. In the case of cement companies, this need is to enable the construction of essential infrastructure, including roads, bridges, and homes. In light of the paramount importance of sustainability, it is imperative that these organisations adopt transformative business practices, refrain from greenwashing, and disseminate information regarding their initiatives in an accurate and transparent manner. This context highlights the importance of managing an organisation's image.

This article examines the manner in which the media represents the public image of the Secil Group in Portugal. Notwithstanding the organisation's endeavours to project an image of sustainability, the media frequently depicts Secil as a polluting entity. While the Edelman Barometer indicates a public perception of distrust in media regarding climate change topics (Edelman, 2022), media representation continues to exert influence on organisational identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2002) and reputation (Brown et al., 2006). Moreover, negative public perception has an impact on stakeholders that extends beyond local communities. These include employees seeking purpose-driven organisations, customers who are opting for alternative building materials, and investors who are prioritising sustainable businesses.

The analysis of the hypotheses offers insights into the strategies that organisations with environmentally impactful operations can adopt in order to counteract negative perceptions. Primarily, Secil should integrate the sustainability narrative throughout all advertising endeavours, including product marketing. This can be achieved by utilising controlled communications,

such as advertisements and branded content, to reinforce the aforementioned message in a consistent manner. In light of the fact that Secil is referenced more frequently in journalistic articles (201) than in advertisements (39), it can be argued that these controlled communications represent a vital instrument for shaping and disseminating its intended narrative.

Secondly, the sustainability narrative must adopt a more comprehensive approach, integrating social and governance dimensions alongside environmental aspects. Although Secil is recognised for social initiatives, such as the Secil Architecture Award, these efforts are rarely contextualised within the sustainability narrative, thereby missing an opportunity to align these actions with the broader ESG narrative. Thirdly, a greater emphasis on governance could establish Secil as a transparent and ethically responsible organisation, addressing a significant gap identified in this study where only one media piece highlighted governance. A greater visibility of governance practices, including ethical standards and decision-making transparency, would serve to enhance stakeholder trust and contribute to the development of a more balanced and integrated ESG communication strategy.

The principal contribution of this study is its application of ESG attributes for the evaluation of an organisation's sustainability framework, particularly in the context of substantial reputational challenges. This approach serves to illustrate the inherent complexities associated with the alignment of an intended image with external perceptions, particularly in the context of persistent industry-wide biases.

Further research could build upon this analysis by investigating additional communication channels, such as social media and stakeholder reports, in order to ascertain the prevalence and uniformity of the sustainability narrative. Qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews with stakeholders, could elucidate perceptions of Secil's actions and provide a more nuanced understanding of how these align with stakeholder expectations and concerns. A reassessment of this analysis in subsequent years, particularly as Secil implements its strategic cycle, *Ambition 2025 - Sustainable Growth*,

will be essential to evaluate the effectiveness of the company's communication strategy in aligning its intended image with stakeholder perceptions, particularly across all ESG dimensions.

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Acknowledgement

This work is supported by Portuguese national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, under project UIDB/00713/2020.

Disclosure statement

The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

The company has granted permission to use its name and information for academic research.

'THIS IS ME' – SAYS THE AGENCY: A MULTI-METHOD CASE STUDY ON THE PROJECTED ORGANISATIONAL IDENTITY OF BANCO DE PORTUGAL

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Introduction

Public institutions holding legislative and normative power, as a countermeasure of their independence granted by the constituting law, are subject to the strict normative imperative of compulsory disclosure and accountability (OECD, 2016). Meanwhile, public authorities have been aiming for more openness due to certain tendencies, such as the increasingly stringent regulatory requirements, the public's intensifying pressure on being informed about the organisation's functioning, and the growing and unquestionable dominance of online-driven communication strategies (Creswell, 2015; Gonçalves, 2014; Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Saxton & Guo, 2012). These trends have been coupled with public agencies' increasing awareness of the opportunities provided by voluntary disclosure (Waeraas, 2010; Waeraas, 2020). As suggested by empirical evidence, going beyond obligatory transparency can provide further benefits for the entity through institutional credibility and trust built with stakeholders forming their assessments on the entity's character traits culminating in reputation and legitimacy judgements.

In this endeavour, the organisation's self-presentation is considered of critical importance not only because it constitutes the base for external audiences' initial assessment on the entity's attractiveness and appropriateness, but also due to its controllable characteristic from the disseminating agency's point of view. As a simultaneously self-definitional and self-differentiating concept, organisational identity not only provides purpose and underlying values to members, but it also plays a pivotal role in stakeholder interaction. Accordingly, the way how the organisation presents itself through communications, the ideal that it wants to be associated with by others, is labelled as the projected identity (Heckert et al., 2019). Although academic research in the field of bureaucratic reputation, legitimacy, and respective communicational strategies of public entities gained strong impetus since the millennium (Maor, 2016), organisational identity related specificities and self-presentation of public agencies remained an unexplored area (Pratt, 2016).

To set foot in this uncharted field, the present paper aims to address a two-fold research question – concerning methodological and substantive perspectives – and explore the self-presentation relevant aspects of public entity's disclosure. To provide an illustrative assessment on the organisational identity of a particular national financial supervisory agency as projected through the main communicational channel, its institutional website, the case of Banco de Portugal (hereinafter, 'the Bank') is discovered. Due to the lack of consensus regarding the methodological approach to be applied for the investigation of the projected organisational identity, the paper first defines the principal guiding criteria for the adequate methodological choice and subsequently, duly reflects on the suitability of the proposed research design, namely, on the multi-method approach consisted by discourse analysis and computer-assisted content analysis.

Accordingly, the significance of the present paper is twofold: first, it presents a systematic overview on the principal considerations and respective requirements for the appropriate methodological choice for the assessment

of the projected identity. Second, through the identification of key concepts related to the institutional specificities of the Bank, the findings contribute to broaden the knowledge and enrich the scarce empirical evidence available on the organisational identity of public agencies.

The paper is structured as follows: succeeding the introductory remarks presented in the current section (Section 1), Section 2 provides a brief overview on the concept of organisational identity, with distinct emphasis on its agency relevant specificities and the significance of its projection in the process of social judgement. Section 3 elaborates on the justification regarding the chosen multi-method approach. Section 4 describes the research design, while Section 5 presents the findings and limitations followed by a brief conclusion in Section 6.

Literature review

The concept of organisational identity

In the intimidating milieu of divergent theoretical approaches and definitional pluralism (Hatch & Schultz, 2000; He & Brown, 2013), academics of the field of organisational communication agree that, as a ‘self-referential meaning’, organisational identity is ‘an entity’s attempt[s] to define itself’ (Corley et al., 2006, p. 87) and also to capture the features that make it ‘recognizably different from others’ (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 267). Discussions on this concept root back to Albert and Whetten’s pioneering paper, arguing that organisational identity is constituted by the dissemination of a set of self-defining statements – i.e., identity claims – directed towards the various stakeholders on the ‘central, enduring, and distinctive’ characteristics (or the ‘CED attributes’, as later abbreviated by Whetten (2006)) of the organisation, deemed as necessary and altogether sufficient to adequately define and distinguish the entity (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Since identity claims aim to define the organisation for multiple audiences and for various purposes, precise self-classification and self-definition, however, ‘may be both impossible and, more importantly, undesirable’ (Albert & Whetten, 1985,

p. 268). It is of common ground that organisational identity is required to reconcile the two opposing needs of validation and similarity to others – i.e., conformity to gain legitimacy – and that of uniqueness and individuation – i.e., positive differentiation forming the base of reputation – termed as the ‘identity paradox’ (Albert et al., 2000; King & Whetten, 2008). Among the referred three pillars, consensus has been considered unanimous regarding the essentiality of the central and distinctive aspects, while the element of durability has been intensely challenged (Corley et al., 2006), culminating in the rich literature of organisational identity change, displaying the conflicting views under the ‘enduring identity’ and the ‘dynamic identity proposition’ (Gioia et al., 2013). While there is consensus among scholars regarding the entirely intangible nature of organisational identity, three main perspectives – the social actor, the social constructivist, and the institutional approaches – dominate the debate on the epistemological aspect of the concept (Gioia & Hamilton, 2016).

Considering the necessary interplay and the inherent interdependent relationships with others, communicating (on) the organisation’s identity, and knowing the relevant parties’ feedback thereon are of fundamental importance (Cornelissen, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Ravasi, 2016; Sequeira & Ruão, 2012). The phenomena when an organisation deliberately and in a predominantly controlled and strategically managed way expresses its sense of self through different channels of communications and symbols is termed as the ‘projected identity’ (Cornelissen, 2004; Fombrun, 1996; Moingeon & Soenen, 2002; van Riel & Fombrun, 2007).¹ It is strongly related to the ‘ideal’ or ‘desired image’ – i.e., the way how an organisation wants to be seen (Balmer & Soenen, 1999; Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Bronn, 2010; Brown et al., 2006) – conveyed typically through the mission and vision statements, credos, and other strategically relevant documents (Heckert et al., 2019). Accordingly, identity projection has the

1. To note that while the term ‘projected identity’ assumes a self-reflective perspective (Abolafia & Hatmaker, 2013), researchers concerned with the interpretation and perception of self-expression (e.g., Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Ran & Duimering, 2007; Rindova & Martins, 2012) label this concept as ‘projected image’.

objective of creating the intended (positive) image – constituting the base for external audiences' initial assessment of an organisation's attractiveness (i.e., reputation) that also leads to perceptions on legitimacy and value congruence (Balmer & Soenen, 1999; Bartel et al., 2016; Bronn, 2002; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Fombrun, 1996; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Gray & Balmer, 1998; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Scott & Lane, 2000). Due to the above referred connection with the organisational ideal defined by the management, it is essential for entities to keep these identities not only aligned, but sufficiently close to each other, since bias between the desired and the actual organisational identity might lead to severe tensions and culminate in identification and integrity problems (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Thus, having a clear understanding on the organisation's identity and the intended perception the entity expects to generate is an imperative prerequisite for the construction of a credible organisational image (Sequeira & Ruão, 2012).

Organisational identity of public agencies

Public sector organisations – such as financial supervisory agencies, whose prime objective is to ensure that financial institutions act in accordance with the legal norms and to protect the interest of consumers through safeguarding the stability of the financial system (Dijkstra, 2010) – feature rather different characteristics than corporations. While many concepts applied in the private sector are easily adaptable to the public sector context, certain problems require the application of a fundamentally different approach (Waeraas, 2008). Although in the field of bureaucratic reputation, legitimacy, and respective communicational strategies academic research on public entities gained strong impetus since the millennium (Maor, 2016), empirical evidence on organisational identity related specificities and self-presentation of public agencies remained scarce (Pratt, 2016; Waeraas, 2020). As lasting common ground, public sector organisations are considered to be characterised by multiple organisational identities (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Christensen et al., 2007; Pratt & Kraatz, 2009; Pratt, 2016; Waeraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012) justified by both internal, organisational differences compared to those of the private sector, and by the particularities of

the surrounding institutional and socio-political environment. Accordingly, the various roles and related multiple conceptualisations of the agency's functions and mission, and the contradicting expectations of the diverse stakeholder groups (Pratt, 2016; Pratt & Foreman, 2000) lead to the coexistence of more than one set of central, enduring, and distinctive organisational attributes.

As emphasised by the analysis of Waeraas and Byrkjeflot (2012), established by the force of law with the aim to serve the public interest, public agencies' *raison d'être* and mission are mostly predetermined. Regardless of stakeholders' perception on the appeal of the mission – which is reflected in citizens judgements on the agency itself – it must be pursued. The resulting lack of flexibility and dependence on the prearranged attributes are termed as the 'politics problem' of public agencies (Waeraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012), culminating in challenges both in identification and in the quest of bureaucratic reputation. The discrepancy lying in agencies' simultaneous roles of being an authority and a service provider ('consistency problem') results in an inherent duality that is difficult to reconcile both at the operational and at the strategic level (Waeraas, 2008). Furthermore, the complexity of the mission and the diverse responsibilities attributed thereby also contribute to the emergence of different internal value-sets. Due to the intense taken-for-granted nature of public services sensed by citizens (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019) and the lurking 'conformity trap' (Antorini & Schultz, 2005) set up by the perceived unity of the entities embedded in the public administration (Carpenter & Krause, 2012), public organisations also encounter difficulties in expressing uniqueness ('uniqueness problem'). Additionally, the legal requirement of equal quality public service provision further undermines the ability to articulate uniqueness through excellence, an otherwise prevalent reputation attribute ('excellence problem'). Finally, resulting from the above referred politics, uniqueness, and excellence problem, public organisations tend to lack charisma and potential for positive emotional appeal (Waeraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012).

As the most prominent external factor leading to multiple organisational identities the diverse stakeholder structure bearing contradicting expectations can be referred (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Maor, 2018; Waeraas, 2008). On the contrary to private sector entities, as their mission is defined in terms of the social good, public organisations do not have the option to choose a target audience or prioritise permanently the stakes of certain groups over those of others. When it comes to the definition and implementation of communication strategy, this feature leads either to trade-offs and conflict, or to the dissemination of deliberately vague or ambiguous messages in order to leave sufficient room for diverse interpretations (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Canel & Luoma-aho, 2020; Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Waeraas, 2008).

Organisational identity projection, as invitation for social judgement

As institutions with normative power embedded in a democratic institutional framework, public agencies are subject to strict obligatory transparency and accountability requirements foreseen by the law. These obligations were created as the ‘countermeasure’ of the institutional independence, to eliminate any potential conflict of – political or economic – interest, bias, or undue influence while carrying out their mandates (OECD, 2016). They are the built-in mechanisms to safeguard democratic principles by providing indirect social control over the institutions holding legislative and normative power. On the other hand, literature implies that voluntary – and more detailed – disclosure is a key element of developing institutional credibility and trust with stakeholders forming their judgements on the general attractiveness (i.e., reputation) and appropriateness (i.e., legitimacy) of the entity, traits that are deemed “critically important for organizations” (Bitektine, 2011, p. 160).

In the specific case of financial supervisors, it has been already demonstrated that, by going beyond the obligatory disclosure and deliberately exposing themselves to social judgement, public sector entities significantly benefit from obtaining strong positive reputation and socio-political legitimacy (Kaponya, 2019). These gains reveal in the form of higher credibility,

recognition, and trust granted by the members of the society that translates into enhanced, voluntary deference and higher acceptance of the authority's decisions leading to the widening of the room for manoeuvre at the authority's disposal. In normal times, this implies the reduction of implementing costs of regulatory changes or that of interventions and the prospect to pursue long-term aims instead of focusing on confrontations in the present. Moreover, due to the protective buffer ensured by strong legitimacy and reputation, techniques of issues and crisis management strategies applied in turbulent times become more efficient and effective.

At the same time, resulting from the public's call for increased – corporate and public sector – transparency, entities have been sensing the pressure to exhibit more openness. In the endeavour of full disclosure, as elaborated in the previous section, the way how the entity presents itself to its specific audiences is crucial. Since identity projection is the very element of the reputation and legitimacy building process over which the organisation has the highest level of control (Frandsen, 2017), and as such, it can be strategically managed, projected identity constitutes an interesting subject matter for organisational communication related research. In line with the theory, recent empirical evidence also confirms that public organisations “have become increasingly aware of their identity, values, and central characteristics and how they are perceived as well as how they want to be perceived” (Waeraas, 2010, p. 530). Therefore, one of the key pragmatic challenges of organisations is “to translate their internally held organizational identity into an intended organizational image that external stakeholders will likely find attractive” (Bartel et al., 2016, p. 475).

Furthermore, in the era of online-driven communication, along with the growing dominance of digital text and web-based communicational solutions, organisations opt overwhelmingly for online technologies to engage with their audiences, turning the Internet as the primary channel for the implementation of communication strategies (Creswell, 2015; Gonçalves, 2014; Phillips & Hardy, 2002). In line with this shift, empirical evidence demonstrates that disclosure has been one of the three main strategies

of cultivating stakeholder relationship (Waters et al., 2009) and official websites “remain[s] the most critical and ubiquitous tools for external organisational communication” (Saxton & Guo, 2012, p. 4). Due to the high reliance on written text, websites can be considered as “the rhetorical products of named organisations-as-rhetors” (Sillince & Brown, 2009, pp. 1835); as – on the contrary to the other concepts involved in the judgement formation process – identity clues and referents are observable and deductible from the institution’s website, it also provides direct access to the projected organisational identity.

Notwithstanding the importance of the respective audiences’ feedback, as elaborated above in the previous section, public entities’ ability to accommodate stakeholder preference on their mission and identity is strictly limited, if not non-existent (Waeraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). While conceptual simplifications – such as focusing excessively on the discrete and instrumental notions in message-transmission and self-expression – might ensue narrow framing of communication by neglecting to reflect on its interactive meaning creation function (Grunig, 2001; Grunig & White, 1992; Koschmann & Kopczynski, 2017), the above referred specificities of public entities provide essential justification for the application of such approach in the analysis of the projected identity. Amidst these circumstances, the warning regarding the potential adverse implications of a superficial or overly instrumental stakeholder dialogue leading to distrust and cynicism, or cacophony and contradiction is deemed highly relevant (Crane & Livesey, 2003), further supporting the applied approach putting the disseminating entity in the spotlight.

Justification for the applied multi-method approach

While the theoretical underpinning of organisational identity generated intense debate (e.g., Albert et al., 2000; Brown et al., 2006; Cornelissen et al., 2020; Dutton & Roberts, 2009; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; He & Brown, 2013; Whetten, 2006), academic interest in the related empirical issues – such as the establishment of methodological standards to capture and analyse the

concept – has remained subdued, leaving the field without consensual ‘best practice’. Accordingly, the heterogeneity of ontological and epistemological assumptions is mirrored in the different pragmatic stances and favoured methodological approaches, leading to parallel conversations and sometimes even contradictory results (Ravasi & Canato, 2013). Applied research investigating organisational identity as projected also stretches in wide, predominantly qualitative methodological range, such as linguistic analysis (e.g., Ran & Duimering, 2007), content analysis (e.g., Aust, 2004; Heckert et al., 2019), and various types of discourse analysis (e.g., Chreim, 2005; Desai, 2017; Sillince & Brown, 2009).

Organisational identity in a discourse analytical perspective

As an approach based on strong social constructivist epistemology (Daymon & Holloway, 2001; Hardy, 2001; Gee & Handford, 2012; Grant et al., 2004; Wetherell et al., 2001), the discourse analytical perspective regards discourse as action-oriented, situated, constructed, and constructive (Potter, 2004). Accordingly, investigation of organisational identity focuses on the scrutiny of processes of identity creation “in the interplay of different actors, employing different discursive strategies and resources to establish a definition of identity coherent with particular interests and goals” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 32). It views the organisation as an entity permanently in the state of ‘becoming’ through discourse and the practices related thereto, favouring the social constructivist perspective of identity construction and the dynamic identity proposition (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004; Gioia et al., 2013). In this case, texts are approached by the analyst as utterances and manifestations of communication (Grant et al., 2004) and are perceived indicative to the research subject, that allow to deduce certain statements about the producer of the text (Titscher et al., 2003). As argued by scholars of the field, it is the link between discourse and the thereby constituted social reality – including organisational identity – “that makes discourse analysis a powerful method for studying social phenomena” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 5). While the lack of established standard method for discourse analysis provides substantial room for methodological flexibility,

studies overwhelmingly focus on aspects related to variations (divergence in descriptions, style, use of keywords), details of content and form, rhetorical organisation, and accountability on performed activities (Potter, 2004).

Among the potential weaknesses that put findings resulting from the application of this approach at the risk of underrating arise from issues related to validity, reliability, and perceived methodological rigour (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Considering the epistemological and ontological assumptions that reality is constructed by discourse, validity cannot be interpreted in the way as in quantitative methods in terms of the accuracy or precision of capturing the ‘real world’. Due to its underlying purpose to “identify some of the multiple meanings assigned to texts” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 74), differences of interpretation are not only acceptable, but inherent features of the approach, implying the inadequacy of standardised methods for discourse analysis (Potter, 2004). Accordingly, the concept of validity – in the sense of veracity – is severely affected by the ‘frame problem’, referring to the feature that any aspect of the indefinitely large context may influence the meaning of an utterance (Gee & Handford, 2012). Thus, validity of discourse analysis can be rather expressed in the form of ‘performativity’ that demonstrates a “plausible case that patterns in the meaning of texts are constitutive of reality in some ways” (Hardy et al., 2004, p. 21) and assessed by softer indicators, such as the convergence of results, agreement on the function of the social language between users and analysts, and sufficient coverage of the sense-making situations (Daymond & Holloway, 2001).

Although coding follows the relevant academic norms, reliability of discursive methods is not measured against formal criteria (Hardy et al., 2004; Neuendorf, 2004), but is underpinned by a set of adequate arguments (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Considering that the aim of coding in the discursive approach is mostly to facilitate the analysis and is based on categories that emerge from the data while examined (Potter, 2004), it is the researcher that “serves as the measurement instrument”, being highly dependent on the expertise and orientations thereof (Neuendorf, 2004, p. 33). Consequently, the concern of replicability also remains relatively unaddressed. As in this case

constructing a code system constitutes an inherently subjective process, the application of a software dedicated to textual analysis does not aim and will not improve the quality of the analysis (Phillips & Hardy, 2002).

Advantages of the multi-method approach

In strong contrast to discourse analysis, the other similar, yet significantly different method used to analyse organisational identity is content analysis. Defined as “an empirically grounded method, explanatory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. xvii), it is based on a realist ontology and positivist epistemology, assuming the existence of an objective, independent reality and relatively fixed meanings reflecting it (Neuendorf, 2004). As a method for textual analysis operating with both qualitative and quantitative techniques, it aims to create testable and measurable results by following an a priori design that are subject to the criteria of validity, reliability, sample representativeness, and objectivity, among others (Neuendorf, 2017). Content analysis, however, is limited in its focus to messages, and inference to source motivations or receiver effects are not warranted (Neuendorf, 2004). In the systematic comparison of content and discourse analysis, Hardy et al. (2004) identify twelve dimensions in which these methods differ, the main differences concerning the divergence in the philosophical assumption on the construction of reality, the principal feature of text as data source, the role of context, and the already referred different interpretation of reliability and validity.

While the contradiction in the ontological and epistemological approach leads some to conclude on the incompatibility of these two methods (Herrera & Braumoeller, 2004; Hopf, 2004), more and more scholars advocate the complementarity thereof in the exploration of social reality (Bennett, 2015; Hardy et al., 2004; Neuendorf, 2004). Although not many studies combine content analysis and qualitative textual analysis (Neuendorf, 2004), researchers investigating organisational identity are urged to opt for multiple methods in analysing textual data “to produce a more nuanced portrayal of the interplay of narratives and claims of distinctiveness and similarity

in the construction” thereof (Ravasi & Canato, 2013, p. 189). Combination of methods, indeed, is not a new trend in social sciences (Fetters & Freshwater, 2015). The practice of triangulation – adopting multiple methods, theories, or data sources in qualitative research with the aim to extend knowledge potential and establish a comprehensive understanding of the examined phenomena (Flick et al., 2012) – has gained academic recognition and is considered as an alternative technique to validation. It promotes research quality by taking different perspectives for the examination of the problem defined in the research question and by producing insights at different levels, “going beyond the knowledge made possible by one approach” (Flick, 2007 p. 41). Furthermore, due the growing dominance of digital text and web-based communicational solutions, the limits of traditional methods and theories have become increasingly obvious (Creswell, 2015; Phillips & Hardy, 2002), not only challenging the idea of ‘one best method’, but also compelling to find common middle ground through mutually acceptable compromises.

It is, thus, argued that, as an adequate form of between-methods triangulation (Flick, 2007), the combination of the referred two methods offers strong potential to counterbalance each other’s limitations and to enhance the overall quality of the research through providing more comprehensive insight into the subject matter of the analysis (Neuendorf, 2004; Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Accordingly, complementary to the detailed, complex examination carried out by discourse analysis, content analysis’ systematic and quantitative focus caters important benefits for the exploration of the social phenomenon under scrutiny by detecting contextual cues for the identification of texts that require more careful reading (Feltham-King & Macleod, 2016; Neuendorf, 2004) and by revealing the history-dependent character thereof (Greene, 2008).

Requirements posed by the research question

Following a pragmatic approach to the data collection and the choice on the applied method for the analysis (Neuendorf, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), the criteria guiding these decisions are set by the substantial part

of the research question aiming to assess the key dimensions of the organisational identity of Banco de Portugal as projected on the permanent sections of its institutional website. Due to the centrality of text functioning as an indicator for the phenomenon under scrutiny and of which the subject matter of the analysis is considered as feature-bearer (Titscher et al., 2003), it is essential that the chosen method approaches text as representations of the investigated entity's characteristics. Given that there is no pragmatic definition established in the literature as to when a statement would qualify as 'identity statement' (Ravasi & Canato, 2013), the chosen method shall provide sufficient flexibility in the identification of clues and freedom for the wider, context-specific interpretation thereof. Furthermore, since identity projection aims not only to self-definition and self-differentiation in a particular social environment featuring specific nexus between the entity and its stakeholders, but also to influence the respective perceptions made thereon (Whetten, 2006), discourse shall be regarded as constructive and action-oriented. Considering that for the purposes of the analysis, identity projection is defined as an organisation's deliberate, controlled, and strategically managed self-expressions, texts and their sequences shall be viewed as situated and purposefully constructed. Finally, the chosen method shall offer viable techniques to handle large amount of textual data.

Considering the requirements presented above, an exploratory sequential two-phase multi-method research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) is suggested, predominantly relying on discourse analytical perspective. Accordingly, as preliminary qualitative research – as defined by Ritchie and Lewis (2003) –, the first stage aims to provide practical identification and determination of the appropriate dimensions of the complex, underlying construct of the agency's organisational identity by the application of discourse analysis. The findings of this exploration then serve as a base for the second, computer-assisted phase aiming to identify and interpret the

central aspects of the organisation by using techniques of content analysis within a discourse analytic approach, as suggested by Hardy et al. (2004).

Research design

Data identification

In order to identify the unit of analysis that duly assists the research question concerning the projected organisational identity, the specific scheme elaborated by Titscher et al. (2003) to text and discourse analysis was followed. The data universe is considered as the discourse publicly disclosed on the Bank's "main channel of external communication" (Banco de Portugal, 2016, p. 59), its institutional website (<https://www.bportugal.pt/en>). The relevant dataset of the study is restricted to the written and voiceover permanent text presented in the menus of the website, divided into two subsets: sections dedicated explicitly to self-introduction – being the subject matter of the first stage of the analysis – and further sections (Figure 1). Sections with periodically updated dynamic content and respective embedded documents (e.g., collections of publications, speeches, press releases) are not subject to the current analysis. Auxiliary texts – such as hyperlinks, paths referring to the location of the webpage, document titles, tags attributed by the Bank, titles of linked additional related documents – were also ruled out of the scope. No sampling was carried out. Data was saved to the more software-friendly text document form on 6 March 2022. The units of data collection are texts included in the submenus. Registration unit is defined as the extract, the minimum text necessary to identify the claim, with varying length (Heckert et al., 2019; Sillince & Brown, 2009).



Figure 1. The relevant dataset and its division between the two phases.

Procedures

The present study aims to discover the potentially relevant key dimensions of the Bank’s identity projection by the application of an exploratory sequential two-phase multi-method research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), predominantly relying on discourse analytical perspective. Accordingly, in the first, exploratory stage of the investigation, discourse analysis is carried out on the section dedicated to self-presentation (‘The Bank \ About Banco de Portugal’) by using a software package designed for qualitative and mixed-methods research (MAXQDA). Among the six subsections, the one on ‘Legal Framework of Credit Institutions and Financial Companies’ and the summary of the Strategic Plan defined for the period between 2017 and 2020 were not considered for the analysis. In the first case, the information presented is restricted to the topical overview of the referred legislation, in the second, the relatively short-term focus and the priorities defined in terms of operational goals justified this decision. In the remaining sections systematic manual coding of presumed identity referents was performed in an inclusive and exact manner, meaning no paraphrasing or other kind of transformation. After obtaining the raw list of potential attributes (183 code phrases), in order to attain a systematic coding scheme, codes were merged (based on their identical word root or content) and grouped (according to the dimension they refer). The plausibility of the applied logic is derived from the structure’s consistency with the cornerstones of identity theory

and the previously gathered stylised facts on agency specificities, resulting in ten dimensions (number of subcategories in brackets): institutional type (6), mission (3), aims (4), functions (13), actions (19), way of functioning (10), values (5), powers (3), reference to the Statute (1), and metaphors concerning the logo (5).

In the second phase, with the aim to assess the above identified central aspects of the organisation on a larger corpus, computer-assisted content analysis – in a discourse analytic perspective (as defined by Hardy et al. (2004)) – was carried out on the remaining permanent sections of the website. The automatic coding of the text was operationalised with a dictionary derived from the shortlisted keywords identified in the previous stage. Based on the principal postulates of organisational identity theory and stylised facts on public agencies, the dimensions of ‘institutional type’, ‘mission’, ‘way of functioning’, ‘values’, ‘Statute’, and ‘power’ were considered closely related to self-definition. As a qualifying criterion, the subcategories with the three highest hits were considered, provided that their respective cumulative frequency is at least three. Dictionary entries are organised according to the relevant subcategories of the dimensions, while search items contain the generic form of keywords, allowing for derivations (conjugated verbs and singular/plural forms). To obtain more precise results, certain keywords were subject to restrictions requiring exact match or case sensitivity. Auto-coded sections were subject to a case-by-case verification to conclude whether keywords assume the relevant meaning and interpretation in the particular context (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013).

Findings

Results regarding the organisational identity of the Bank

The first phase of the analysis shed light on the diversity of potential keywords that can be linked to the organisational identity of the Bank (see Table 1). Findings are consistent with the previously referred stylised facts and underline the importance of the institutional type (i.e., the designations of ‘authority’ and ‘central bank’), the surrounding institutional framework

(i.e., being part of the European supervisory system), and the functional diversity in Banco de Portugal's self-definition. Functional heterogeneity is also mirrored by the large number of different actions throughout the sections. The dual mission of the Bank – i.e., to maintain price stability and to promote financial stability – is explicitly articulated and further elaborated in the more operational level of 'aims'. Similarly, the description of the Bank's history applies a strong functional perspective, putting high emphasis on institutional forms as well. In the behavioural dimension, 'autonomy' and 'independence', as traditional central bank values ensured by the funding legislation are the most relevant. The section on the Statute demonstrates a strong power dimension, which is coherent with the empowering nature of the organic law. References as to the way how the entity shall function are present at a larger proportion in the sections on the Statute and Codes of Conduct.

Table 1 – Identification of keywords for organisational identity relevant dimensions

Code System	Frequency	Selected keywords
INSTITUTIONAL TYPE	51	
*authority	10	
national supervisory authority	2	
statistical authority	1	
resolution authority	1	
foreign exchange authority	3	'authority'
macroprudential authority	1	
national statistical authority	1	
monetary authority	1	
*issuer	4	
euro banknote and coin issuer	1	
bank of issue	3	

Code System	Frequency	Selected keywords
*member	18	
part of the European banking supervision system	1	
*SSM member	5	
implicit (formed by)	1	
part of the SSM	3	
integral part of the SSM	1	
*SRM member	3	
implicit	1	'part of'
part of the SRM	2	'in that quality'
		'in its capacity'
*Eurosystem member	9	'member of'
implicit (comprising)	1	'joined'
in that quality	1	
in its capacity as a Eurosystem	1	
joined the ESCB	1	
member of the Eurosystem	1	
(integral) part of the Eurosystem	4	
<hr/>		
*other references	9	
powers to supervise the banking system	1	
supervisor	1	
regulator	1	
intermediary in international monetary relations	1	
commercial bank	3	
privately owned until nationalisation	1	
advisor to the government	1	
<hr/>		
*public entity	3	
public limited company	1	
public law legal person	1	
public institution	1	

Code System	Frequency	Selected keywords
central bank	7	'central bank'
MISSION	15	
mission	2	'mission'
financial stability	7	'financial stability'
price stability	6	'price stability'
POWERS	4	
powers as euro banknote and coin issuer	1	
powers to supervise	1	'power'
powers to intervene	2	
WAY OF FUNCTIONING	19	
*autonomy	5	
administrative autonomy	2	
autonomy in the conduct of monetary policy	1	'autonomy'
financial autonomy	2	
*independent	4	
independent	1	'independent'
independence	3	'independence'
*linked to the EU	2	
subject to	1	
in line with EU	1	
*qualification	2	
expertise	1	
highly qualified staff	1	
administrative dependence	1	
ethical	1	
high standards of professional ethics	1	
impartiality of staff	1	
rigor	1	
transparent	1	

Code System	Frequency	Selected keywords
VALUES	5	
accountability on activity	1	‘value’
effectiveness and efficiency	1	‘accountability’
independence	1	‘effectiveness’
social and environmental responsibility	1	‘efficiency’
team spirit	1	social and environmental responsibility’
		‘team spirit’
ORGANIC LAW / STATUTES	11	
		‘organic law’
		‘statute’

The second stage of the analysis highlighted important specificities of the text under scrutiny, namely, that keywords not only refer to typical features of the Bank but are also widely employed in general terms, and are deeply integrated in the technical, regulatory vocabulary (Table 2). Even intrinsic expressions such as ‘central bank’ or ‘power’ appear in the technical language (e.g., ‘central bank money’ or ‘discharging power of normal coins’), ruling out a significant fraction of the shortlisted sections.

Regarding the dual mission – in line with the competences distributed under the European supervisory framework – results clearly imply that Banco de Portugal emphasises more its financial stability related mandate. While under the Single Supervisory Mechanism, the oversight of supervised entities and their respective activities takes place at both national and supranational level, pursuing price stability is fully coordinated under the common monetary policy of the Euro Zone. Although decisions are taken by the Governing Council also comprising the governors of the participating national central banks, price stability related issues are thematised and communicated by the European Central Bank. This result is further strengthened by the observation that non-qualifying hits for price stability were, without exception, ruled out due to the direct reference to the Eurosystem or the European Central Bank.

Among the keywords related to institutional type, despite the high percentage of non-relevant hits situated in the context of corporate governance

requirements, membership in different European institutional frameworks or other supranational organisations turned out to be the leading identity referent. Although less in frequency, the term ‘authority’ was overwhelmingly used in self-determining sense, featuring the second highest accuracy of hits. As referred earlier, due to its extensive involvement in technical terms, the occurrence of the phrase of ‘central bank’ was dominated by non-relevant professional expressions. Associated to this aspect, the relevance of the constituting law is also confirmed by the results, being featured predominantly in the section titled ‘The Bank’. To further support the importance of the Bank’s belonging to the European infrastructure, references to the statute of Banco de Portugal and to that of the European Central Bank are almost equally divided. This observation suggests that, consistently with the findings on membership, there is a strong emphasis on the European perspective in the Bank’s self-definition.

While the officially assumed organisational values were explicitly referred in the introductory sections, the only attribute that notably appeared was ‘effectiveness’. ‘Accountability’ – despite the low number of occurrences – turned out to be the only keyword that was entirely used in the relevant sense, related to the Bank. On the contrary to the expression of ‘mission’ – which was exclusively used to refer to an organisation’s overarching purpose and objectives – the phrase ‘value’ did not appear in its sense of defining organisational qualities and traits; its use is solely related to technical terms concerning statistics, payments systems, indicators, or banknotes and coins. Similarly, ‘independence’ revealed to be overwhelmingly used as a legal-technical term, in the section on microprudential requirements.

Table 2 – Relevance of the auto-coded sections after human verification

Dimension	Relevant hits		Non-relevant hits		Total
	number	%	number	%	number
Institutional type	86	44	108	56%	194
authority	24	69	11	31	35
central bank	10	28	26	72	36
member	52	42	71	58	123
Mission	32	55	26	45	58
mission	4	57	3	43	7
financial stability	19	59	13	41	32
price stability	9	47	10	53	19
Aims	63	77	19	23	82
price stability related	1	100	0	0	1
financial stability related	62	77	19	23	81
Functions	91	45	110	55	201
payment system	36	34	71	66	107
monetary policy	55	59	39	41	94
Actions	176	44	226	56	402
assess	77	50	76	50	153
regulate	26	46	31	54	57
ensure	64	53	56	47	120
guarantee	0	0	26	100	26
identify	9	20	37	80	46
Way of functioning	4	10	35	90	39
autonomy	0	N/A	0	N/A	0

Dimension	Relevant hits		Non-relevant hits		Total	
	number	%	number	%	number	
Values	independent	4	10	35	90	39
	values	27	24	86	76	113
Statute	accountability	0	0	54	100	54
	effectiveness	2	100	0	0	2
	team spirit	25	44	32	56	57
	social and environmental responsibility	0	N/A	0	N/A	0
		0	N/A	0	N/A	0
Power	9	90	1	10	10	
TOTAL	19	50	19	50	38	
	507	45	630	55	1137	

Results regarding the suitability of the proposed method

The experience learnt from the study underpinned the need for the blended approach in a discourse analytical perspective, confirmed the suitability of the suggested research design for the investigation of the concept of projected organisational identity, and demonstrated how the two methods can counterbalance each other's weaknesses.

Neither content, nor discourse analysis, in itself, could be considered sufficient to address the problem under scrutiny. First, the concept of organisational identity and the respective attributes and claims in which it is intended to be captured is challenging to operationalise, making it impossible to rely on an a priori built coding system. Second, keywords are not only manifold, but can refer to different entities. Despite their distinct, agency relevant nature, context specific phrases are not only strategically used to refer to their abstract conceptual meaning (e.g., the 'administrative independence of the Bank'), but also tend to be incorporated in legislative technical language to address rather different notions (e.g., the independence

of certain managers as a legal obligation for supervised entities under the corporate governance requirements). Third, the interplay of the complex context and technical language dominated discourse leads to difficulties in machine-coding. Even if keywords are predominantly used to describe a typical agency feature (e.g., ‘mission’ or ‘power’), since the embedding European institutional infrastructure also comprises supervisory agencies with similar profile, the characteristics that the expressions refer to are not exclusive for the authority under scrutiny. Furthermore, due to the complexity and interconnectedness of the national and the international institutional systems, proper understanding of this framework is required to ensure correct interpretation. Accordingly, careful and comprehensive reading is essential to accurately assess whether a trait referred to a higher order supranational mechanism can be attributed to the Bank through its involvement therein (e.g., European Central Bank’s Supervisory Board) or not (e.g., to the European Central Bank).

On the other hand, carrying out discourse analysis on a disproportionately large corpus of published written material on an institution’s website is not only tedious, but also ineffective, if not impossible. This wide scope requires the application of more automatized, systematic techniques featured by content analysis, that enable to guide the analysis by identifying the sections that require closer analysis. Keyword-in-context type search significantly facilitates the examination of technical and legal language dominated texts by revealing typical word combinations (e.g., ‘Deposit Guarantee Fund’) and patterns in a given document (e.g., ‘the institutions must ensure’ or ‘exercising competent and independent judgement’ in the corporate governance requirements) permitting swift confirmation of the highlighted sections’ relevance. This feature not only enables extensive corpus processing but is also pivotal in the selection of relevant keywords.

Limitations and future research

The limitations of the study are related to the exploratory nature thereof, namely, that the analysis was carried out on a restricted database. Although

the identification of the potentially relevant central, enduring, distinctive attributes provides important input on the self-presentation of the Bank, it cannot be deemed indicative to the role and weight of these attributes in the ongoing communication strategy.

Accordingly, future research shall cover a substantially larger dataset comprising strategically managed active discourse (such as speeches, interviews, press releases, and annual reports) that is more dedicated to the transmission of identity claims. The ampler corpus would also enable reflection on the dynamic aspect – changing frequency and relative weight – concerning the use of the identified attributes.

Conclusion

Organisational identity, as the ‘soul of the organisation’, is both a self-definitional and a self-differentiating concept. Notwithstanding its role to provide a purpose and underlying values to members, being the very root of other key constructs falling under the scope of strategic communication (such as organisational image, reputation, and legitimacy), it also has crucial importance in stakeholder interaction. Established by the force of law, public entities, however, not only lack discretion in determining their ‘central, enduring, and distinctive attributes’, but also face limitations stemming from the politics, consistency, uniqueness, and excellence problems. Furthermore, along the quest of consistency, multiplicity resulting from their complex mission, various functions, and the contradicting expectations of their diverse stakeholder structure poses serious challenges to agencies.

The present paper argued that public agencies’ identity projection can be considered the first and essential step to invite stakeholders to form social judgements on the entity, paving the way to related assessments culminating in reputation and legitimacy. It is also the very element over which the entity has the highest level of control that is also traceable on the main communicational channel, the institutional website. Subsequently, investigation

of projected organisational identity provides valuable insight on the way how the leaders of a public organisation want the entity to be seen by its most important stakeholders and the key attributes intended to guide the judgements on the entity's reputation and legitimacy. Due to the respective organisational specificities – namely, that identity creation (or change) cannot be considered as a joint meaning-making process between the authority and its stakeholders – focusing the analysis on the disseminated clues and messages has been considered an adequate perspective.

Capturing projected identity, however, requires a complex, nuanced analysis. Apart from the difficulties related to the identification of identity claims, the exercise is further exacerbated by the need to go beyond the interpretation of texts, also discovering the relationships between the discourse and the social reality it creates. Consequently, it is indispensable that the chosen method provides for sufficient flexibility for context specific interpretation and for detecting subtle clues of identity attributes. Considering the relevant data universe, suitability for analysing large amount of data disseminated on the Bank's institutional website is equally an imperative.

Although the analysis was carried out on a highly technical corpus dominated by legislative requirements, findings regarding the key dimensions of the Bank's self-definition on the introductory sections of the website turned out to be relevant and in line with the stylised facts. The importance of authority, as institutional form, the strong interference of the surrounding institutional framework in which the agency is embedded, and the transversal dominance of the functional perspective mirroring the diverse responsibilities of the Bank was identified. The reliance on the creating legislative act, the statute, was also found prevalent, along with the emphasised reference on the legally defined dual mission. Regarding this aspect, findings also confirm the relevance of the institutional nexus and its consequences on the distribution of competences between the Bank and the European supranational organisations, attributing more emphasis on financial stability considerations. Among the organisational values, only 'effectiveness' was traceable in the permanent sections.

The case study confirmed the suitability of the proposed research design through showcasing the complications related to the exercise, namely, the impossibility of the creation of an a priori code structure, the significant similarity of strategic keywords in the technical language, and the context-dependent interpretation of phrases. Accordingly, it was duly shown how content analysis' systematic and quantitative focus can be complementary to the detailed, complex examination carried out by discourse analysis, through the detection of contextual cues for the identification of texts that require more careful reading (Feltham-King & Macleod, 2016; Neuendorf, 2004). Considering the predominantly technical nature of the text under scrutiny it is also expected that the method performs better on material forming the essence of ongoing communication – such as speeches, interviews, or annual reports – that allow for stronger incorporation of a strategic perspective.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This article was written with financial support from FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia – Portugal), reference FCT 2020.07830.BD, under the auspices of the research unit ICNOVA.

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**GOVERNMENTAL PUBLIC RELATIONS
STRATEGIES: THE SAUDI PUBLIC
COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA DURING
THE PANDEMIC CRISIS**

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Introduction

In the digital age, strategic communication has emerged as a pivotal force in shaping public perception and government policies, especially during crises. This paper explores the governmental Public Relations Strategies and Public Communication during the Pandemic Crisis. It focuses on the role and efficacy of strategic communication by the Saudi Arabian government during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly using social media platforms. This research addresses the critical intersection of public relations, crisis communication, and digital media. It provides insights into the effective strategies of governmental organizations in times of global health pandemic crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges and required innovative public communication strategies. The Saudi Arabian government's response, which relies on social media to disseminate information and engage with citizens, offers a rich context for analysing the nature of public relations and strategic communication (Aldarhami et al., 2020). In this paper, a theoretical framework is developed to frame public communication

actions by the Saudi governmental organization. This framework is developed using various communication theories and models, such as stakeholder, gatekeeping, and persuasion models. It also includes Grunig's four models, the key opinion theory, and the two-step flow theory. By applying these theoretical lenses, it is possible to understand how information was managed and presented during the crisis.

This paper also explores the strategic role of public relations and social media communication by Saudi governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The purpose of the study is to examine the public relations strategies implemented by the Saudi governmental organizations and their effectiveness in managing the crisis through social media as a public communication tool. By analysing existing theories and models of public relations and communication, the literature review offers a comprehensive understanding of how strategic communication helped to disseminate vital information during the pandemic. This review paper uses a thematic review methodology. This approach involves identifying, analysing, discussing, and explaining themes within the literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic of social media communication of Saudi governmental Public Relations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Despite extensive research on the use of social media in Saudi Arabia during the pandemic (Mohammed & Ferraris, 2021), there remains a significant gap concerning the effectiveness of these strategies. By investigating the effectiveness of these tools, the research seeks to answer pivotal questions about the evolution of media data strategies and the role of public relations in crisis situations. The primary research question focuses on the role of public relations and the evolution of media strategies within Saudi governmental organizations during the COVID-19 crisis. This is further broken down into specific queries that investigate the use of social media platforms such as Twitter/X.

Theoretical Framework

Strategic communication is imperative because it helps in passing information from one party to another. The literature review will focus on strategic communication and how the Saudi Arabia government has used it to communicate COVID-19. The literature review will also analyse theories and models of communication where the theoretical framework will also inform the methodology. This analysis of the existing theories will help understand how they can be used to examine the research problem. Through the literature review, the researcher will investigate and analyse studies related to the research topic and questions that aim to find out the public relations role and media data strategies used by the Saudi Arabia governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The government of Saudi Arabia has done a lot as well as other governments (Alahdal, Basingab, & Alotaibi, 2020).

The literature review and research revolve around theories and models. The theories and models help us to develop a better understanding of the research problem. This paper examines various communication theories and models, such as the stakeholder, gatekeeping, and persuasion models, alongside Grunig's four models, the key opinion theory, and the two-step flow theory, to frame the government's actions within a theoretical context. These theoretical lenses help in understanding the processes through which information was managed and presented to the public during the crisis. The theories are as stated and explained below.

Stakeholder, gatekeeping, and persuasion models

According to stakeholder theory, leaders must understand and account for all stakeholders (Nie, Ibrahim, Mustapha & Mokhtar, 2019). Stakeholders are important in any nation or organization because of their important contributions. In the case of a country, citizens are the major stakeholders. They play an essential role in impacting decision-making. On the other hand, they are paying taxes that impact the revenue of a nation. The theory applies to the literature review because the literature review has focused

on communications between the government and the citizens (Nie et al., 2019). Moreover, the government should understand and account for citizens because it must inform them of the health risks that face them. As far as strategic communication is concerned, the essentiality of stakeholders cannot be ignored. The government must employ communication strategies that are aligned with the needs of the citizens across the nation.

In communication, gatekeeping is the process of selecting and prioritizing information based on relevance and importance (Kyprianos, Sifaki & Bantimaroudis, 2020). In the busy modern world, there is a lot of information from events and occasions. It would be impossible for media houses, institutions, and leaders to share every piece of information with their audiences (Kyprianos et al., 2020). Gatekeeping helps to select the information that will be more useful and important to audiences. The gatekeeping theory is important to the literature review. In strategic communication, analysing information is one of the most important steps (Kyprianos et al., 2020). Analysing information helps to know the most important information and information that can be dropped or communicated later. Apart from focusing on strategic communication, the literature review also focuses on COVID-19 (Kyprianos et al., 2020). The application of gatekeeping theory in the literature review helps to understand the importance of prioritizing COVID-19 information.

Persuasion theory is a mass communication theory that deals with messages with the main aim of changing the behaviours and attitudes of receivers (Geers et al., 2018). In this case, it is important to know and understand that there are different reasons why communication takes place. In some cases, communication is aimed at informing receivers, while in other cases, it is aimed to persuade receivers to change in one way or another (Geers et al., 2018). The theory is relevant to the literature review because it touches on one of the main goals of implementing strategic communication (Geers et al., 2018). The literature review focuses on the application of strategic communication in persuading people to change their behaviours to frustrate the spread of COVID-19. With the help of the theory, it will be easy to know if

the strategies employed by the government are persuading or the government needs to employ more effective strategies (Geers et al., 2018).

Research by Mohammed & Ferraris (2021) argues that social media platforms, particularly Twitter, have been a significant source of information during COVID-19. People who are active on social media can easily be affected by the information shared on social media because they are exposed to it most of the time. According to Mudrick, Miller, & Atkin (2016), social media has the power to affect the behaviours of social media users. Even though Mudrick et al. (2016) focus on the influence of social media from a marketing point of view, their work shows that social media is one of the tools that can influence consumers' behaviours.

Grunig's four models

Grunig and Hunt models are associated with public relations. The models are arranged from basic to sophisticated models. The first model is the press agency model. In this model, an organization or government gains the public's attention (Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Ni, 2021). Press agency uses one-way communication to communicate to the target audiences, and it is hard to evaluate this model's impact on audiences. The second model is the public information model. In the public information model, the goal is to share truthful information with the recipients ((Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Ni, 2021). The major characteristic of the public information model is that it is one-way communication. However, trustworthiness and accuracy of the information are major emphases. The third model is the two-way asymmetrical model ((Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Ni, 2021). The model advocates for two-way communication. The use of persuasive communication is common, and its aim is to influence the stakeholders' actions, behaviours, and attitudes. The fourth model is a two-way symmetrical model ((Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Ni, 2021). The fourth model promotes and sustains two-way beneficial relationships where back and forth discussions are promoted to ensure that all parties are involved ((Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Ni, 2021). The two-way symmetrical model offers an ethical advantage because it considers stakeholders by making them part and parcel of the communication

model. When there is accountability and transparency, citizens trust the government, promoting a good relationship between the government and its citizens.

The Grunig and Hunt 4 models of public relations are helpful in examining the government's COVID-19 communication strategies because they offer a framework to categorize and evaluate the effectiveness of various communication approaches (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2021). The models present basic and sophisticated models in public relations. With an understanding of how the government of Saudi Arabia was communicating about COVID-19, it will be easier to identify the models that the government used. The four different models have varying levels of effectiveness (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2021). The application of the models will help to know why communication worked or why it did not. For example, the first two models are one-way communication, while the third and fourth models are two-way communication. Investigating the approaches the government used to communicate will help to know if the government employed the first, second, third, fourth, or several models.

Key opinion theory

Key Opinion Theory is mainly used in marketing and especially social media marketing. The theory focuses on the aspect of using social media platforms to influence members of society (Wang, Bai, Li & Wang, 2020). There is a direct link between the theory and the research and literature review. The research has focused on how the government of Saudi Arabia has been using social media platforms to influence the Saudis. Through social media platforms, the government (MOH) has managed to increase knowledge of COVID-19 among Saudis (Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, the use of the theory in the research is appropriate because the theory is concerned with how to use social media to influence public opinion, which is in line directly with the research focus. This review examines how Saudi governmental organizations, specifically the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH), use social media platforms to influence public behaviours and increase awareness of COVID-19. By applying Key Opinion Theory, the research connects

theoretical knowledge with practical implications, explaining how social media an effective tool for public health communication during a crisis can be.

Two-step floww theory

The Two-Step Flow Theory states that information goes through two steps before it reaches the targeted audience (Soffer, 2019). For example, gatekeepers or opinion leaders convey information to their audiences. The theory concludes that most people form opinions based on the opinions of their leaders (Soffer, 2019). The theory is applicable in this research because it has touched on the essentiality of using media to form the opinions of public members. The aspect of leadership is evident in this case because leaders are responsible for making decisions (Soffer, 2019). In Saudi governmental organizations, leaders play a crucial role in decision-making and disseminating information. This is evident as Saudis have gained significant knowledge about COVID-19 and effective ways to handle the pandemic, which is primarily due to their leaders' influence and communication efforts (Soffer, 2019). As a result, the theory emphasizes the significance of leadership and media in public communication during a global health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Public Relations, Social Media, and COVID-19

Public relations, social media, and COVID-19 are three terms that have been used in the literature, and they are related as far as strategic communication is concerned. In the next section, the literature review will focus on public relations strategies and the utilization of social media to communicate about COVID-19. The government of Saudi Arabia uses social media to communicate to its citizens, and it is important to investigate if social media tools helped in the promotion of public relations roles. This section will also focus on the social media platforms that the government employs.

Crisis communication has been greatly transformed due to the COVID-19 outbreak in Saudi Arabia (Hassounah, M., Raheel, H., & Alhefzi, M. (2020).

Governmental organizations have implemented creative and innovative solutions to engage external stakeholders such as public members in knowledge and information sharing. Gutiérrez-García, Recalde, and Alfaro (2020) argue that social media provides an opportunity for government officials to generate ideas about public engagement within corporate communication. Therefore, the utilization of social media can help government officials to communicate about any crisis that may face a nation.

According to Hinson (2012), practitioners in public relations should manage strategic decision-making and organizational behaviour processes that align with public informational needs and should do it from a strategic management point of view. There has been a redefinition of strategic management during the era COVID-19 pandemic to accommodate the utilization of social media. Changes have taken place as far as communicating with the public is concerned. The inclusion of the public in decision-making to promote a balanced dialogue between governmental organizations and the public members has been widely fostered. The reason behind it is that the use of social media has presented a platform where members of the public can contribute. The feedback of members of the public influences the government in making decisions. Traditional public relations activities, such as media relations and information sharing, have changed public relations practices during this time of COVID-19. The government and organizations have been using digital platforms more than ever before. As opposed to the pre-social media era when the governments relied heavily on mass media, the government has incorporated social media as a tool for promoting public practices, promoting a shift within public relations departments.

Park (2021) states that crisis management is one of the most important things when a nation or the world is going through calamities. Crisis management is the process of putting measures in place and employing strategies that will help to reduce negative events. However, there are challenges when it comes to managing crises if there are no effective communication tools. Social media has become an important tool in managing crises across the world. Moreover, it is limited in nations with a small percentage

of people connected to social media. The ability of social media platforms to promote instant communication makes them suitable channels for communication but only for audiences that have embraced the use of digital tools of communication.

Park (2021), along with Tambo, Djuikoue, Tazemda, Fotsing & Zhou (2021), argue that there is a direct need to use effective communication tools when managing risks. There is a connection between risk managing and crisis communication. When the government communicates about a certain crisis, some citizens might respond with panic, which exposes them to risks such as stress and depression (Park, 2021). Given that social media promotes immediate communication, the government can use social media to reduce the risk of panic among members of society. For example, when people are panicking because of a new outbreak, the government can use social media to reassure them that they can protect their lives, thus reducing stress (Tambo et al., 2021). Even though the risk of misinformation is an issue of concern, some strategies can be used to reduce the risk. Governments using social media can employ social media managers who ensure that there are no accounts that imitate the country's name. The best way to implement this is to have laws in place that criminalise the use of fake accounts. The government can also employ social media personnel who explore the internet to ensure that there are no fake accounts imitating government's accounts.

The increased use of social media during COVID-19 is similarly reflected in Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC). Andijan, Fazio, and Azhar (2020) reported that containment measures against COVID-19 such as lockdowns, closure of learning institutions, and banning all forms of social gatherings required the proactive implementation of communication strategies by governmental officials in many of the GCC countries. In this regard, media data strategies proved pivotal in controlling the spread of COVID-19. For instance, Andijan, Fazio, and Azhar (2020, p.842) reported that "Multiple awareness campaigns in different languages are in progress through various forms of media to increase public awareness about COVID-19 infection". Other efforts include providing timely information on the rate of

infection, death, and recovery. Other public relations programs include educating the public about curfew hours and following government directives. However, government officials reported lockdown curfew violations and special cases during the holy month of Ramadan (Orfali et al., 2021). In this case, it was evident that despite the government's initiatives, some GCC citizens failed to heed the government's advice.

In their research, Al-Ghamdi & Albawardi (2020) focus on the variety of voices on social media discussing COVID-19 with specific reference to WhatsApp and Twitter platforms which are widely used in Saudi Arabia (Al-Ghamdi & Albawardi, 2020). Even though most scholars have focused on the positive side of using social media as a platform to communicate, the current study focuses on both the negative and positive sides. It is important to note that the social media platforms used for good and beneficial purposes are the same platforms used to spread false information and cause chaos (Al-Ghamdi & Albawardi, 2020). Different levels of the government of Saudi Arabia, organizations, and public members have been utilizing social media platforms. Social media platforms bring together people from different backgrounds and classes (Al-Ghamdi & Albawardi, 2020). Governments are changing to align their service delivery with the interests and needs of the citizens (Al-Ghamdi & Albawardi, 2020).

The Saudi Ministry of Health is one of the governmental organizations that have created a dedicated team of social media strategists who have helped create messages that meet public informational needs. For instance, selecting a dedicated team of public relations experts to address people's concerns about the spread of the virus and mitigation measures. The adoption of digital media varies across nations. Likewise, the Jordanian MOH has implemented social media strategies during the pandemic to inform the public about containment measures such as wearing masks, social distancing, and handwashing via platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. (Al-Dmour et al., 2020).

During the era of COVID-19, the government has worked hard to implement strategic communication. The first area pertains to the use of social media, where the government is the source of information. In this regard, social media has been seen as a tool that the government can use to convey information about an issue that is urgent (Aljameel et al., 2021; Du Plessis, 2018). COVID-19 updates were urgent, especially after the outbreak of the pandemic. There was no information about the pandemic because it was new to people (Alfaro, 2020). However, using social media, it was possible and easy to reach many people. In this case, proximity principles apply. The principle of closeness states that publics tend to form relationships with people who are closer to them (Ittefaq, 2019). From a communication point of view, proximity principles apply when the communicator avails the information to the targeted audience (Ittefaq, 2019). In this case, the communicator ensures that information is directed and channelled to the relevant beneficiary or recipient. The second area that Aldarhami et al. (2020), Gutiérrez-García, Recalde, and Alfaro (2020), Wang and Wang (2020), and Du Plessis (2018) have agreed with Aljameel et al. (2021) is about the use of social media where the government is not the source of information. The WHO used its online platforms to communicate about the pandemic when there was an outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020. Technology has made it possible for people worldwide to connect (Aldarhami et al., 2020). Saudi Arabia has opened to the global community, and therefore, the people of Saudi Arabia could access information about COVID-19 through online platforms (Wang and Wang, 2020).

The best way a government can protect its citizens is by having constant communication about the prevailing issues (Aldarhami et al., 2020). Understanding the citizens is paramount because it avoids unnecessary conflicts with the government (Alahdal et al., 2020). When Saudi Arabia started implementing COVID-19 safety guidelines, it was important for the government to explain to the public members why it was doing so and why it was necessary (Alahdal et al., 2020). Through public relations, the

government of Saudi Arabia explained the importance of citizens adhering to the rules and regulations which were put in place.

Critical Examination of Reviewed Studies

Raising awareness and providing access to adequate information during a public health crisis is vital for government organizations. Aldarhami et al. (2020) argue that social media use in public information related to COVID-19 is instrumental to the government of Saudi Arabia. Specifically, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has provided citizens with information concerning social distancing from regular handwashing to stay-at-home directives. Aldarhami et al. (2020) report that 78% of Saudi Arabia citizens relied on the MOH for information related to COVID-19 as a reliable source in 2020. Similar findings by Huynh et al. (2020) reveal a similar pattern in Vietnam, where 86% of citizens believed the government for COVID-19 information. Similarly, Aldarhami et al. (2020) report that high levels of public awareness create opportunities for governmental organizations to implement containment measures during a public health crisis. Aldarhami et al. (2020) report that “high levels of awareness among the Saudi population, demonstrated in the early stages of the pandemic, indicate the existence of established plans by the government to educate the nation about coronavirus” (p. 682). It is therefore arguable that the Saudi MOH has established communication strategies to disseminate information and create public awareness about COVID-19. Public awareness campaigns conducted by the MOH included critical information related to coronavirus and prevention strategies such as Stay-at-home, Meter-and-half, We-cooperate-we-do-not-indulgence, Coming-back-with-caution, and Without-your-right-hand. These are some of the public awareness media campaigns that the Saudi MOH conducted. The analysis by Aldarhami et al. (2020) clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of the use of social media in communicating about COVID-19 by the Saudi MOH because the information shared by the government was helpful to citizens.

Even though Alhassan & Aldossary (2021) have paid more attention to social media as the fastest way to communicate with the public, they have also focused on social media as a tool that promotes engagements between the government and citizens. During the outbreak of COVID-19, the world was in a state of shock, and not every person managed to handle the news of the pandemic without becoming stressed or anxious (Alhassan & Aldossary, 2021). The deployment of social media played a useful role in measuring public response as well as levels of stress and anxiety. One of the advantages of using social media as a communication tool to engage the public is an immediate response (Alhassan & Aldossary, 2021). After posting, people can reply and air their views. If they do not understand the message that has been passed across, they can immediately state so. Social media presented the Ministry of Health with an opportunity to communicate and engage members of the public (Alhassan & Aldossary, 2021). Through citizens' responses, the government could assess if its strategies were working or not. This can be explained using the Shannon and Weaver communication model.

According to the Shannon and Weaver communication model, human communication can be broken down into seven concepts (Kubota, 2019). The concepts are sender, encoder, channel, noise, decoder, receiver, and feedback. With social media, the government utilized the seven concepts (Kubota, 2019). The information starts from the source and ends with the public members giving feedback about the communication. In this case, the World Health Organization is the source of information. The reason behind it is that the WHO has been informing respective nations about COVID-19 and the best ways to deal with the virus. The encoder is the government of Saudi Arabia. The government of Saudi Arabia is responsible for converting the information from the WHO into details that can be shared with the members of the public. The channel of information can be associated with social media platforms. The literature review focuses on the use of social media, and this means that it is the primary channel. Regarding the concept of noise, this may only happen if there is an error when sending a message. It

affects the process of passing the message to the intended consumer. The fifth concept is the decoder (Kubota, 2019). In this case, the information that the government of Saudi Arabia shares is converted into data that members of the public can consume. The sixth concept is the destination (Kubota, 2019). In this concept, the information gets to members of the public. The last concept is feedback, which is associated with the response of the recipients (Kubota, 2019). In the case of Saudi Arabia, this entails the response of citizens after consuming the information.

Aljameel et al. (2021) conducted a study to investigate five regions within Saudi Arabia and the levels of awareness in each of the regions. The main aim was to know the effectiveness of the methods of awareness that were used in every region. The social media platform associated with the study was Twitter (Aljameel et al., 2021). The government of Saudi Arabia used Twitter to make some of the most important communications about COVID-19. According to the findings, the levels of awareness among the five regions differed.

The study by Aljameel et al. (2021) also focused on public sentiments and their effects on creating awareness among the people of Saudi Arabia. When the World Health Organization declared that COVID-19 was a pandemic, information started circulating on social media platforms (Aljameel et al., 2021). Even though not every piece of information was accurate, much information circulated was factual and from the WHO. As a result, people were aware of COVID-19 but had little knowledge of how to deal with the pandemic. According to Alomari, Katib, Albeshri, & Mehmood (2021), the modern world is connected to a level never seen before. Technology has fostered innovations and technological means of bringing global citizens together. Social media platforms are used for fun and entertainment and are also used to communicate important information with members of society.

The first revelation, as presented by Alomari et al. (2021), pertains to the government. After analysing the tweets that were collected, there were fifteen measures of COVID-19. The measures are the strategies that the

government has put in place for citizens to follow to reduce the spread of COVID-19. The role of social media in public relations has been depicted as crucial in this case. The second revelation pertains to the significance of social media in creating a platform where the government communicates and gets the chance to interact with the citizens or get information from the citizens (Alomari et al., 2021). Social media platforms promote engagements, and that is evident in the tweets that were collected. After the government communicated about the measures that should be put in place, there were responses and concerns from the public members (Alomari et al., 2021). In this regard, it is important to investigate the goals of public relations in any government. The main goal is to communicate with the citizens and ensure that there is clarity. When there is immediate feedback from the public, the government can assess if the message was received by the public members positively or not. In this case, the application of McNamara's pyramid of outputs and outcomes would be essential. The three steps of McNamara's pyramid model are inputs, outputs, and outcomes.

Inputs refer to the material and strategic components of communication programs. Outputs refer to the physical materials and activities to produce writing and designs of communication. Outcomes refer to the results that are attained after implementing specific communication strategies. The theory applies to the primary goal of government using social media to communicate with citizens. In this case, the main goal of communication is to produce positive outcomes, and that is to inform members of the public. The government can use the model to design an effective communication channel. The model brings together all essential aspects of communication. In addressing the aspect of outputs, the government can come up with a strategy that is most likely to be effective. After identifying the strategy, the selection of materials becomes pertinent. In this case, the use of technological devices becomes essential. The activities that are involved are posting and sharing information. After coming up with a strategic communication plan and identifying activities and materials to use, the government can

attain the outcomes that it desires. Attaining positive outcomes is a likely scenario when the government employs the best materials and approaches to communication.

Desvars-Larrive et al. (2020) agree that the COVID-19 pandemic affected many nations across the world. Both developed and third-world nations did not anticipate the pandemic, and therefore, the impact was severe because all nations were caught unaware. However, one aspect was crucial: communicating the problem to the public members (Desvars-Larrive et al., 2020). When there is a health concern, pharmaceutical concerns are put in place. However, this was not the case in COVID-19. The outbreak of COVID-19 came at a time when there was no medicine to control it. The healthcare sector did not have enough information about the best pharmaceutical interventions to employ (Desvars-Larrive et al., 2020). However, non-pharmaceutical interventions played an integral role in controlling the spread of COVID-19.

The utilization of social media gives citizens a platform to be heard and contribute to matters of the nation (Joos, 2019). Citizens can utilize social media to consult with the government as well as seek advice and guidance. Based on the research by Zhao and Zhang (2017) social media makes it easy for users to access public forums. As a result, they can produce and share information on issues of public importance. At the same time, public relations play an essential role in enabling organizations to gain better knowledge on stakeholder management. According to Ji, North, and Liu (2017), experts in the field of public relations must consider the significance of research in meeting the interests of stakeholders. They should include public participation and engagement through available online forums. There has been a realization of the significance of social media strategies and public relations. This realization has been during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is worldwide. The utilization of social media stands out as a strategy that produces positive fruits and thus influencing governments to utilize a strategic management approach that guides social media as a highly effective strategy in dealing with COVID-19. Some governments, such as the United

States and the United Kingdom, have been using social media before, and they have proven that it can be effective in communicating. For this reason, some of the nations across the world have opted for social media with the main aim of promoting effective communication and reaching a significant number of people within a short time. Also, a proactive approach to stakeholder management is essential in addressing key stakeholder concerns. According to stakeholder management theory, there is a dire need for an organization to create value for all stakeholders (Pedrini & Ferri, 2019). From the government's perspective, the theory puts more emphasis on the need for the government to create value for citizens. The government can do so by ensuring that it meets the needs of the citizens. For instance, it is important to note that misinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic have been rampant. Social media platforms such as Twitter have been used as tools of misinformation asserted by Grazed and Maia (2020). Conspiracy theories about the virus's origin have also been spreading at an alarming rate (Grazed & Maia, 2020). Conspiracy theory is defined as the attempt to explain tragic events. However, it does not dwell on the truth but associates' people and countries with tragic events (Douglas et al., 2019). For this reason, stakeholder management favours the governmental organizations by providing them with the best approaches to disseminate information concerning the COVID-19.

Without fear of doubt, social media platforms have played host to conspiracy theories and that has affected most of the vulnerable people who do not know more about COVID-19 (Prasad, 2021). The sophistication of such campaigns requires that public health officials implement public relations programs that are robust and will help maintain public confidence during the era of COVID-19. Consequently, the government opened unique social media accounts and utilized them for communicating with the citizens. When there is a high level of awareness among citizens on the availability of legit social media accounts that belong to the government, citizens are likely to prioritize the information that such platforms share.

The outbreak of COVID-19 redefined how some governments use social media platforms to communicate with their citizens as well as engage them on matters about COVID-19. Many researchers have invested in extensive research to examine how government organizations utilize social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Muniz-Rodriguez et al. 2020). Additionally, the essential role of social media in intergovernmental information sharing and strategic planning has also been researched, e.g., by Gil-Garcia et al., 2019. The researchers conclude that governments, through their respective social media platforms, can share information. Haro-de-Rosario et al. (2018) found that the use of social media by local governments to enhance community engagement and participation revealed the role of social media and public relations in promoting transparency and accountability.

According to Islm et al. (2021), specific factors motivate citizens to engage governments on social media platforms during COVID-19. Citizens do not engage the government more often when there are no crises. If they are interested in accessing information from the government, they use other ways of communicating with the government than social media (Islm et al., 2021). For example, there are government offices that provide information about the initiatives and services of the government. People not connected to social media opt for such methods of communication. COVID-19 has changed the interests of citizens because information about COVID-19 has become important, thus increasing the interest of citizens in knowing more about the virus (Islm et al., 2021). After the WHO announced COVID-19 and its seriousness, governments were responsible for devising measures and guidelines to help save their citizens. The population and environment of a nation affect the spread of COVID-19. For this reason, the WHO has advised nations to come up with interventions and implement them. Even though the WHO is not a legislative body, it has been given the authority to give directives on health measures that specific nations should take by countries under the United Nations. The government is the supreme authority in any

respective nation, giving it the authority to come up with health and safety guidelines. It becomes important for citizens to enquire from the government if they are interested in factual data or accurate information.

Discussion

Public awareness campaigns by government organizations have helped to manage communication during COVID-19. According to Al-Hanawi et al. (2020), the Saudi Ministry of Health undertook a comprehensive public awareness campaign through Facebook and Twitter in response to the pandemic. Through Twitter and Facebook, the government communicated about COVID-19 and what people should do to reduce the spread of the virus. Communications via social media and government websites have proven instrumental so far in providing COVID-19-related information. Of note, demographic factors - age and gender - have been studied to see their influence on social media use. For example, Asaad et al. (2020) indicated that middle-income and highly educated female respondents have more information concerning emerging infectious diseases than other segments of Saudi society. Asaad also concluded that, as expected, younger and educated individuals are more aware of digital and social media (e.g., Twitter) than the older generation. Also, improving public relations and exploring media data strategies provides essential input into reducing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public relations focus on the best ways to communicate, while media data helps in conveying the specific message that an organization or government wants to pass. Identifying the best methods of communication and conveying the right information helps to reduce COVID-19 because people get to know what they need to do to deal with COVID-19. Hence, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter play a critical role in disseminating awareness-raising interventions.

During the pandemic, the government took action to frustrate the spread of COVID-19 (Alahdal et al., 2020). The two strategies that the Ministry of Health opted for were curfews and quarantine. However, the two strategies were aimed at protecting the citizens from contracting COVID-19. It is

important to note that COVID-19 is a new illness, so people do not know as much about it as other diseases (Alahdal et al., 2020). Members of the public are likely to have little to no knowledge of a new illness. Communications from the government become an important aspect of public relations roles in ensuring that public members understand the current health situation with accurate information about the pandemic.

Similar studies on the role of public relations practices in communicating with the public by other governments have been conducted to establish the importance of digital communications during national emergencies. For example, Gutiérrez-García, Recalde, and Alfaro (2020) argue that digital communications played a significant role in providing access to information and creating awareness for the public in Spain during the pandemic. The study revealed that access to information among the younger generation created a high level of knowledge concerning COVID-19 related information. The study only focused on Spain; however, other studies presented information on how digital communication increased awareness in different countries for other publics. Such studies include Wang and Wang (2020) and Du Plessis (2018), who demonstrate that access to information and an established information technology infrastructure increases the efficiency of public relations and communication strategies that educate people in hard-to-reach areas. Hard-to-reach areas are locations where mass media organizations do not cover due to issues of setting up satellites to transmit broadcasting signals. Telecommunication organizations have invested heavily in setting up their satellites, and that has increased people covered by mobile phone services. With the help of the infrastructure of telecommunication organizations, it is easier to reach more people than televisions and radios can. Aldarhami et al. (2020) likewise concluded that increased awareness is directly related to improved educational levels, social media use, and demographic characteristics.

AlHumaid, Ali & Farooq (2020) assert that COVID-19 has affected many people psychologically and increased stress among the people of Saudi Arabia (AlHumaid et al., 2020). They argue that, despite some limitations,

the Saudi government has been effective at limiting the impacts of the virus as it has deployed effective public relations strategies such as the utilization of social media to communicate with the citizens. For example, the government has utilised constant communication forums to update citizens on the progress of response to COVID-19 and what citizens need to do to be safe. The effectiveness of these strategies is seen in each strategy's ability to address the issue of concern. For example, when communication helps to reduce panic and stress among members of society, it means that the communication effectively dealt with the issues it was designed to deal with (AlHumaidd et al., 2020).

Rather than focusing on effectiveness, Hammad & Alqarni (2021) investigated the psychosocial effects of social media during COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia. Their research examines the negative side of social media and how social media platforms were used to increase fear and panic among members of society. One of the disadvantages of social media is that there is a lot of freedom and less supervision. Therefore, it becomes possible and easy for people with no facts to share their assumptions (Hammad & Alqarni, 2021).

Hammad & Alqarni found that anxiety, depression, and social alienation are evident among Saudis who used social media platforms during the outbreak (Hammad & Alqarni, 2021). Their study of 371 Saudi participants identified that 83% of them were exposed to social media (Hammad & Alqarni, 2021). Misinformation is one of the factors that led to the mental disorders that the patients were suffering from. Misinformation promoted the sharing of information that increased fear. As a result, stress among citizens increased, thus exposing them to a mental health issue (Hammad & Alqarni, 2021). Some people sharing COVID-19 information on social media did not source the information from reliable sources, which means that some of the information was inaccurate (Hammad & Alqarni, 2021).

Research Gap and Future Directions

Most millennials are active social media users and have the knowledge and capabilities to differentiate between genuine and misleading information. The benefits of social media in managing and communicating crisis has been reported by Fowler (2017); Eriksson and Olsson (2016). Governments worldwide, especially developing countries, prefer social media such as Twitter to engage the public and demonstrate a readiness to prioritize public health concerns. The reason behind it is that most of the popular social media platforms were founded in developed nations. Therefore, people in developed nations are more used to the technologies when compared to people in other nations across the world. The use of social media has become a priority, especially during this time of COVID-19 (Penny cook, McPhetres, Zhang, Lu, & Rand, 2020). Even though some of the developed nations have used interviewers who meet to face with citizens to collect information, the practice continues to decrease (Penny cook et al., 2020). The reason behind it is that one of the regulations of COVID-19 is social distancing, and social distancing has affected many face-to-face interactions.

Research by Islm et al. (2021) demonstrates a strong connection between social media use and governmental public relations. Their study acknowledges that governments utilize social media as a communication tool (Islm et al., 2021). During the outbreak of COVID-19, governments worldwide had to deploy the most effective forms of communication for their populations. Many people worldwide are subscribed to the internet and have social media accounts (Islm et al., 2021). The best way to communicate with the citizens is by looking into the tools that have high chances of effectiveness or tools that can reach a lot of people and help deliver accurate and timely information.

Multiple studies conducted by Al-Kandari et al. (2019) support the wide-ranging opportunities of social media in public relations. Primarily, social media tools are more efficient, and timesaving compared with traditional media. This is because a social media message can reach many people within the

shortest time and require fewer resources, human or financial, to create and disseminate. To this end, social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) play a pivotal role in public relations, provide insights into citizens' expectations, and amplify government efforts to engage the public. However, despite the numerous benefits of social media in public relations, disadvantages such as propaganda allegations erode public trust in the government to implement a communication crisis plan. In dealing with the issue, it becomes paramount for governments to use social media platforms only to use government sites and shut down any fake accounts. Doing so would reduce the erosion of trust among members of society. Despite extensive research on the use of social media in Saudi Arabia during the pandemic (Mohammed & Ferraris, 2021), there remains a significant gap concerning the effectiveness of these strategies.

Conclusion

COVID-19 is an illness that was never anticipated, and its effects are dire (Abbas et al., 2021). The illness has affected and disrupted many people's lives in South Asia, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other countries worldwide. As a result, cases of mental illnesses also continue to increase. As opposed to two to three decades ago when there were no social media platforms, the introduction and utilization of social media continues to gain popularity, and governments worldwide have been using the platforms to connect with their citizens (Abbas et al., 2021).

According to Abbas et al. (2021), the pandemic has created fear. Social media platforms have been used as tools to cause fear, and at the same time, they have been used as strategies to help overcome fear (Abbas et al., 2021). With the help of social media, governments have had the opportunity to present clarifications that help erode false information at the citizens' disposal. Fear has been one of the contributing factors to mental illnesses (Abbas et al., 2021). When people share false information on social media, some subscribers take it seriously and allow the information to affect them (Abbas et al., 2021). Through social media, it has become possible for governments to share the truth about COVID-19.

Social media has been beneficial during the time of COVID-19 in different ways. First, it has helped to know the responses that have been made to the illnesses (Mohammed & Ferraris, 2021). Second, people in different parts of the world have been able to know what nations across the world are doing to fight the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, through social media, people have been able to encourage each other during this challenging time. The lack of social media would have affected the situation because there would be no platforms to promote engagements and communication (Mohammed & Ferraris, 2021). Scholars have investigated and researched the use of social media in Saudi Arabia during the pandemic era. However, there has been a gap in the effectiveness of the strategies of using social media as a tool of public communication. The gap pertains to the most effective tools and the impacts they have on the public. The researcher will be answering the question of “how” effective social media can be as a communication strategy. The literature review bridges the gap by presenting materials that help rate the effectiveness of using social media as a communication tool during the era of COVID-19.

This review paper makes a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge for public relations and communications professionals working in governmental and non-governmental organisations. It emphasises the pivotal role that public relations and social media communication strategies played in disseminating information during the global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and evaluates their dual impact on public health and government communication. The study addresses the existing research gap regarding the effectiveness of social media as a public communication tool in crises. Furthermore, it offers insights and a theoretical framework for public relations and communications professionals, providing a comprehensive analysis of theories and models in public relations and strategic communication.

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Chapter 1

Ethics and Society: Challenges in Organisational and Public Communication

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In the contemporary era of unprecedented global interconnectivity, the ethical dimensions of communication have assumed heightened importance for organisations and public institutions. The function of communication has expanded beyond its traditional role as a mere conduit for conveying messages. It has become a strategic instrument that influences perceptions, shapes behaviours and builds relationships between entities and their stakeholders. This evolution reflects broader societal shifts, including technological advancements, global crises, and intensified public scrutiny, which have positioned communication as a central aspect of organisational and institutional operations. Those with a stake in an organisation or institution are becoming more demanding of transparency, accountability and authenticity, as a result of their greater access to information and ability to mobilise through digital platforms. It is thus imperative that communication practices align with societal values, with ethical commitments embedded not only in messaging but also in actions.

Keywords: ethics, normative imperative, societal challenges, transparency, accountability.

Chapter 2

The Normative Imperative: Ethics

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The normative imperative in strategic and organisational communication emphasizes the critical role of ethics in addressing sociopolitical challenges. This paper highlights the importance of normative theory in guiding ethical decision-making across various fields, particularly within strategic communication and through the use of normative scholarly analyses. Advocating for a Kantian deontological issues management framework, that normative paradigm utilizes the categorical imperative to ensure moral actions. A refined ethical issues management model is presented, integrating moral deliberation throughout the process. By adopting these principles, organizations can enhance ethical decision-making, improve relational outcomes, and build public trust, ultimately contributing to organisational effectiveness, relational outcomes, professionalism, and advanced scholarly inquiry.

Keywords: Ethics, Strategic Communication, Normative Theory, Kantian Framework, Public Trust.

Chapter 3

Adapting to the Challenges of Communication in the Digital Age: Ethical Principles for PR Practice in Germany

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The relevance of ethical considerations in public relations (PR) practice is becoming increasingly apparent, especially with the advent of new technologies such as social media and artificial intelligence (AI), which present new challenges and ethical dilemmas. The German Council for Public Relations plays a pivotal role in the advancement of ethical communication practices within Germany. The Council was established in 1987 and serves as a voluntary self-regulatory body for communications professionals. The primary responsibilities of the Council include the formulation and revision of ethical codes and guidelines, the monitoring of compliance with these standards, and the disclosure of misconduct. The Council's objective is to ensure the maintenance of ethical standards in communication, thereby preserving public trust. The German Communications Code of 2012 represents the most significant foundation for ethical PR practice in Germany. The Code emphasises fundamental principles, including transparency, integrity, fairness, truthfulness, loyalty, and professionalism. Other guidelines address more specific aspects of communication ethics, (e.g. science PR, AI). This chapter uses three case studies to illustrate the Council's work when established ethical guidelines are breached. In light of the evolving communications landscape, the Council assumes a prominent role in offering guidance by ethical guidelines to address the current challenges in PR practice. It is therefore imperative that PR ethics, codes and guidelines are integrated into communications education, as is adequate media visibility.

Keywords: PR ethics, codes, guidelines, AI, German Council for PR.

Chapter 4

Ethical Issues in the Contemporary Practice of Public Relations

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The rise of digital communication strategies — including sponsored content, social media influencers, and AI-driven tools such as social bots and big data analysis — presents new ethical dilemmas in public relations practice. These technologies blur lines between advertising and journalism, raising concerns about transparency, authenticity, and the potential for manipulation. This chapter debates how public relations legitimize organisational actions in the public sphere through persuasive communication, emphasizing the ethical challenges inherent in this process. By revisiting foundational concepts in public relations theory, it examines two normative perspectives: public relations as advocacy and as dialogue. Drawing on normative frameworks, including Habermas's ethics of discussion and Grunig's theory of excellence, it critically analyses the complexities of ethical public relations in the evolving digital landscape.

Keywords: public relations ethics, dialogue, symmetry, digital strategies, Habermas.

Chapter 5

Habermas's Communicative Action and the Constructivist-Relational Theory as References for the Communication of Sustainability in Organizations

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This study explores and substantiates the normative foundations for a theoretical approach to organisational communication for sustainability, drawing on Jürgen Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action (1984) and Stanley Deetz's Politically Attentive Relational Constructionism (PARC) (2010). The objective of the research is to identify points of convergence between the two frameworks that can inform communication practices in the construction of shared meanings around sustainability. A non-systematic review of the literature was conducted to identify key authors whose work is aligned with the two theories. This review revealed that ethical conduct and the inclusion of diverse audiences are critical alignments between the two theories. These findings are in accordance with the recommendations set forth by organisational bodies regarding the communication of sustainability. The study underscores the potential of collaborative meaning-making as a means of addressing the challenges outlined in the United Nations 2030 Agenda. It proposes collaboration as a model for achieving more effective and inclusive communication outcomes.

Keywords: Communicative action; Habermas; Relational-Constructivism; Stanley Deetz; Sustainability.

Chapter 6

University Fourth Mission and Social Impact. Ethic Imperative and Relational Challenges in the Context of High Education in Italy

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The article examines the evolution of university missions within the context of corporate and public communication, with a particular focus on the emerging trends surrounding the Fourth Mission/social impact. The study investigates these developments in comparison to European trends and other organisational frameworks, while examining the extent to which these “new missions” are being institutionalised by academic governance. The findings indicate that, in addition to regulatory changes, there has been a transformation in definitions and cultural norms within the Italian university system, suggesting a broader shift towards a more strategic and ethically driven approach. This advanced vision places an emphasis on a relational and communicative framework that prioritises long-term responsibility and the creation of shared value with stakeholders and society. In this context, universities are not merely the disseminators of knowledge; they are reimagined as dynamic institutions that integrate traditional educational models with digital platforms, thereby fostering mutual engagement and community relationships. This shift is perceived as a departure from the traditional, unidirectional model of university impact, towards a reciprocal and strategic model that seeks to generate sustainable benefits for both academic institutions and their broader communities. The study’s findings emphasise the necessity of integrating this ethical approach into the institutional framework of academic governance to effectively address the evolving relational and communicative challenges facing Italian universities.

Keywords: university communication, university impact, university missions, value, corporate communication, public communication.

Chapter 7

Decoding the CSR Communication Paradox: Strategies for Effective Engagement

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Over the past few decades, there has been a notable increase in the number of companies engaging in CSR activities, which has subsequently led to a rise in the amount of CSR communication. The contemporary understanding of corporate social responsibility (CSR) may be attributed to a combination of factors, including academic research and social and political pressures that have emerged over the past seven decades. As stakeholders become increasingly informed and demanding, effective communication is essential for the dissemination of information, the establishment of trust, the enhancement of reputation, and the fulfilment of stakeholders' expectations.

Nevertheless, there are instances when CSR communication may engender scepticism rather than achieving the objective of demonstrating a company's contribution to societal well-being. Nevertheless, it is also thought that companies can play a significant role in addressing current social issues in a positive manner. This creates a paradox around CSR communication that presents a significant challenge for professionals in the field.

The objective of this study is to gain deeper insight into the paradox of CSR communication and to identify the most effective strategies for communicating CSR. The researchers employed a mixed methodology, comprising an initial literature review and an online survey of Portuguese consumers, followed by interviews with six companies. In conclusion, the study presents a set of guidelines on how companies should approach CSR communication, based on a synthesis of the findings.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility; CSR communication; Organisational communication.

Chapter 8

Social Participation in Public Organisations: A Case Study of Santa Catarina's Prosecutor Office (MPSC)

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It is of the highest importance that civil society assumes an active role in the development of competencies within the public sphere. It is incumbent upon organisations, particularly those in the public sector, to facilitate this participation. The objective of this research is to ascertain the extent of social engagement in the communication channels of the Public Prosecutor's Office of Santa Catarina (MPSC), a Brazilian public institution with the mandate of defending citizens' individual and collective rights. The data collected provided a sample of 453 communications published on the organisation's social media platforms. The findings indicate that the communications disseminated by the organisation are primarily oriented towards disseminating information to the public, without actively involving them in participation or decision-making processes. The content of the social media messages is primarily informative and educational in nature. An analysis of the content of the posts reveals that the objective of the MPSC is to disseminate information to citizens regarding their rights. However, there is a notable absence of citizen involvement in the deliberations and decision-making processes.

Keywords: organisational communication; participation; social media; public organisation; Ministério Público de Santa Catarina.

Chapter 9

Public Sector Communication and Gender Perspectives: Italian Local Social Media Practices of Italian Regions

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The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 emphasises the significance of gender-sensitive communication in promoting inclusivity, challenging stereotypes and strengthening trust in public institutions. This exploratory study examines the adoption of such practices in Italian public administrations, with a particular focus on social media. The findings indicate that there is a paucity of implementation due to factors such as bureaucratic resistance, political influence, and challenges that are specific to digital communication. Those regions with a left-wing political orientation tend to demonstrate a greater sensitivity to gender issues. The study highlights the potential of public communication as a space for the implementation of inclusive practices. It emphasises the necessity for professionals to be empowered and for future research to refine strategies and facilitate the adoption of these practices across diverse contexts.

Keywords: Gender-sensitive communication, Public communication, Digital Communication, Social media, Gender equality, Institutional communication, Policy implementation.

Chapter 10

The Sustainability Narrative Challenge: The Secil Group

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The environmental implications of the cement industry present a significant challenge to its reputation, necessitating the development of narratives by public relations professionals that highlight the sector's positive societal contributions. The image of an organisation is of great consequence in the formation of relationships with stakeholders and the attainment of legitimacy. The management of media relations plays a pivotal role in influencing public discourse and fostering trust in corporate endeavours.

This article examines the Portuguese media's perception of the Secil Group's sustainability image, a local cement company. This study has three specific aims: (1) to analyse Secil's intended public image as a sustainable organisation; (2) to evaluate its media portrayal; and (3) to identify and understand the discrepancies between the two. The findings of this study are based on a content analysis informed by framing theory (Entman, 1993) and Hallahan's (1999) attributes model. This analysis reveals a significant divergence between Secil's projected sustainability narrative and its media representation as an entity that pollutes.

In order to effectively address these challenges, it is recommended that Secil adopt a more comprehensive sustainability narrative. It is advisable that the scope of the sustainability narrative be expanded to encompass social and governance (ESG) dimensions in addition to environmental concerns. Such an approach would guarantee the consistent integration of these aspects into all forms of communication. The integration of this narrative into both institutional messaging and product marketing will facilitate the achievement of greater alignment between the company's intended and perceived images.

Keywords: intended image, media image, public relations, sustainability, framing, cement companies.

Chapter 11

'This is Me' – Says the Agency: A Multi-Method Case Study on the Projected Organisational Identity of Banco de Portugal

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Public agencies are subject to the actual normative imperative of compulsory disclosure in the form of transparency and accountability requirements foreseen by the law. Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that, by deliberately exposing themselves to social judgement, these entities can gain further benefits by building strong reputation and socio-political legitimacy. In this endeavour, the organisation's self-presentation is of critical importance, as it constitutes the base for external audiences' initial assessment on the attractiveness and appropriateness of the entity, featuring an interesting subject matter for strategic communication research.

As an illustrative case study, through the identification of the key dimensions of its self-definition presented in the permanent sections of the institutional website, this paper aims to assess the projected organisational identity of Banco de Portugal. Considering the methodological heterogeneity of the field, the article also seeks to provide rationale and justification for the necessity to opt for a blended approach applying a two-stage research design featuring discourse analysis and computer-assisted content analysis. Accordingly, the paper not only contributes to the scarce empirical evidence available on the organisational identity of public authorities, but also demonstrates the synergies stemming from the combination of two fundamentally different approaches in the investigation thereof.

Keywords: public agency, projected organisational identity, discourse analysis, content analysis, multi-method approach.

Chapter 12

Governmental Public Relations Strategies: The Saudi Public Communication in Social Media during the Pandemic Crisis

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This paper examines the strategic role of public relations and social media communication by Saudi governmental organisations during the global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV). The objective of this study is to examine the public relations strategies employed by Saudi governmental organisations and their efficacy in crisis management through the use of social media as a public communication tool. By analysing existing theories and models of public relations and communication, the literature review offers a comprehensive understanding of the role of strategic communication in disseminating vital information during the pandemic.

Theories of communication are employed to examine pivotal concepts such as public relations, social media, communication strategies, and the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic. The aforementioned theories include those pertaining to stakeholders, gatekeeping, persuasion, Grunig's four models, key opinion theory, and the two-step flow theory. The research study identifies a significant gap in the existing literature regarding the effectiveness of social media as a public communication tool. In particular, the research seeks to identify the most effective social media tools and to understand their impact on public engagement.

The research questions are designed to investigate the ways in which Saudi governmental organisations employed social media, particularly Twitter/X, to communicate with the public during the pandemic crisis caused by the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV). This review paper study employs a thematic methodology, with the objective of identifying, analysing, discussing and

providing knowledge related to themes in the literature, to offer a comprehensive insight into the social media communication strategies of Saudi governmental public relations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Keywords: Public Relations; Social media; Saudi organizations; Strategic communication; Covid-19; Risk and crisis communication.

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DOI FCT - LABCOM

<https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/00661/2020>



This scholarly volume provides a comprehensive examination of the ethical and strategic dimensions of organisational and public communication in the contemporary era, characterised by digital transformation, global interconnectivity, and evolving societal expectations. Edited by Evandro Oliveira and Gisela Gonçalves, the book comprises chapters developed from presentations delivered at the OSC Interim Conference held in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2023. The contributions are authored by distinguished scholars in the field of ethics, offering rigorous analysis and innovative insights into critical topics such as artificial intelligence, corporate social responsibility, sustainability communication, and public relations within democratic frameworks. By integrating foundational theories with empirical case studies, *Ethics and Society* equips readers with ethical frameworks and practical tools to address the complexities of contemporary communication. The book is designed for academics, professionals, and policymakers, and it highlights how ethical communication can build trust, accountability, and foster societal progress in an interconnected world.