Understanding tensions in strategic communication practices: a strategy-as-practice study of the music industry

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Abstract

Purpose – In this study, we applied the strategy-as-practice (SAP) framework to analyse strategic communication practices. SAP implies approaching strategy as something that organisational members do and is useful for understanding the tensions between emergence and formalisation and between planning and improvisation that characterise the everyday communication work of communication practitioners.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on an ethnographic study of a record company and on qualitative interviews with various actors from the music industry.

Findings – Tensions exist between the emergence of inputs from active consumers that require flexibility and attempts to strategically formalise and continuously adapt plans and encourage consumers to act in anticipated ways. The findings revealed five strategic communication practices—meetings, working in the office, gathering and analysing consumer engagement and related data, collaboration and storytelling—that practitioners used to conduct strategic communication and navigate the tensions.

Originality/value – The study contributes to understanding the role of strategic communication practices in contemporary organisations and how practitioners manage the tensions within them. The study shows that an SAP approach can account for improvisation and emergence, as well as planning and formalisation. It also shows how SAP resonates with emergent and agile strategic communication frameworks.

Keywords Agility, Communication management, Music industry, Practices, Strategic communication, Strategy as practice

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Datafication, platformisation and other emerging digital technologies and trends have contributed to creating a complex, constantly changing dynamic environment that poses unprecedented strategic communication challenges for contemporary organisations (Heide *et al.*, 2018; Nitschke and Donges, 2018). Digital technologies invite consumer engagement and generate related real-time data that are fed back into organisations' strategic communication while also serving as social platforms on which organisations collaborate

and co-create value with consumers and other external actors (Brodmerkel and Carah, 2016; Nieborg and Poell, 2018). This creates tensions between emergence and formalisation and between planning and improvisation in communication work. To manage this situation, organisations have increasingly adopted open, dynamic and agile approaches to strategic communication (Seiffert-Brockmann *et al.*, 2021; van Ruler, 2019, 2020, 2021) that depend on adaptivity, responsiveness to external demands, speed, efficiency and effective performance (Sherehiy *et al.*, 2007; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). Accordingly, strategic communication practices are being reconsidered as emergent processes that are open to collaboration (King, 2009; van Ruler, 2020) but should, at the same time, facilitate planning and formalisation (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015).

Gulbrandsen and Just (2016) called for a "strategised communication" perspective that aligns with the *strategy-as-practice* (SAP) framework (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2015; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Whittington, 2006), which emerged from strategy research within the management discipline and has been introduced to the field of strategic communication research (Falkheimer and Heide, 2018; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2013, 2015). According to this perspective, strategy is something that organisational actors and their members *do* as part of their everyday practices, rather than a static overall long-term plan that an organisation *has* (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2015). Drawing on SAP, we defined strategic communication practices as the collectively shared and accepted ways of communicating that actors recursively perform to achieve organisational goals. Strategic communication is the concrete activity that emerges from these practices.

Some communication scholars have explicitly drawn on SAP (Aggerholm and Asmuß, 2016; Duffy and O'Rourke, 2015; Gulbrandsen, 2019; Marchiori and Bulgacov, 2012). However, it has been more common to apply the approach somewhat loosely to understand the strategic communication of organisations operating in a constantly changing environment (Chaudhri *et al.*, 2022; Falkheimer and Heide, 2015; Frandsen and Johansen, 2022; Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016; Nothhaft *et al.*, 2018; van Ruler, 2019; Volk and Zerfass, 2018). For example, SAP has been recommended for understanding strategic improvisation (Falkheimer and Sandberg, 2018) and emergence (Heide *et al.*, 2018; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015). However, it can also be used to understand formalisation and planning (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2015; Nitschke and Donges, 2018). Hence, the SAP approach needs to be fully integrated into strategic communication research to elucidate what organisations do to "engage in conversations of strategic significance" (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018, p. 493) in a dynamic environment. Therefore, the aim of this study was to integrate SAP into research on strategic communication to understand the tensions between emergence and formalisation, as well as between planning and improvisation, in strategic communication practices. Against the backdrop of prior research and the ongoing societal changes described previously, we focused on how consumer engagement on digital platforms and consumer data create tensions in strategic communication practices.

We pursued our aim within the context of the music industry. This industry has been highly influenced by complexity and change due to digitalisation and related radical innovations during the last 20 years and has adapted its production, distribution, consumption and strategic communication practices accordingly (Skålén and Gummerus, 2023). Today, music organisations are at the forefront of using digital platforms and data to create consumer engagement and build customer relationships (Brembilla, 2019; Jenkins, 2006). The connectivity between music companies and external stakeholders, including consumers, has increased considerably (Wikström, 2020), but the organisations' control over the flows of communication has decreased. Following communication professionals within the music industry allowed us to investigate underexplored tensions in strategic communication practices between improvising based on input from active co-creating consumers and the subsequent emergence of strategic communication and staying in control,

planning and formalising strategic communication (Choi and Burnes, 2013; Gamble and Gilmore, 2013). Specifically, we conducted an ethnographic empirical study of a record company and held qualitative interviews with a range of actors from the music industry (e.g. record company management, branding and communication representatives, PR consultants and music artists). Strategic communication practitioners in the music industry are expected to act on consumption data from digital platforms and music streaming services when promoting artists (Wikström, 2020). This and other developments have made music companies reconsider their everyday practices, leading them to adopt open and agile approaches to strategic communication. In this study, we applied SAP to our empirical material to understand the role of these everyday strategic communication practices. By doing so, this paper responds to calls for research on how strategic communication practices are carried out (Heide *et al.*, 2018; Volk and Zerfass, 2018), how communication practitioners manage opposing demands and tensions in fluid, changing contexts and how they adjust their strategic communication practices based on input from stakeholders (Edwards, 2018; Falkheimer *et al.*, 2016; Falkheimer and Heide, 2018; Valentini, 2015; van Ruler, 2019) while planning operations.

Theoretical framework

This section explains the SAP approach in detail and reviews strategic communication research that has drawn on SAP or similar understandings of strategy.

SAP

SAP is based on practice theory in the social sciences (Reckwitz, 2002). Practice theory focuses on studying the social world by examining practices as collectively shared and accepted activities that actors recursively perform. The leading contemporary practice theorists Reckwitz (2002), Schatzki (2019) and Shove *et al.* (2012) explained that practices encompass both *the actual performances* of concrete activities by actors and *the templates* or prescriptions for action that inform those actors' activities. The templates remain relatively stable over time and formalise the practices that inform actors' planning of actual performances. However, templates do not determine performances that can vary within the same practice. For example, lectures in higher education have different content, despite being based on unifying templates that formalise teaching planning and activities. However, performances conducted outside templates may change them, thus resulting in the emergence and innovation of new practices. For example, the use of novel technologies in lecturing may change lecturing practices. Hence, there is an iterative relationship between templates and the performance of practices that makes practice theory suitable for considering formalisation and planning as well as emergence and improvisation.

SAP research places strategy against the backdrop of practice theory. From this perspective, strategy is something that organisational members do, sometimes with other actors (e.g. consumers), in their everyday practices, implying that strategy is an ongoing accomplishment (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2015; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Whittington, 2006). In the context of strategy research, SAP provides an alternative and reaction to the dominant approach to strategy as an overarching static overall long-term organisational plan. However, this does not mean that planning is absent from strategy. Informed by general practice theory, SAP research has identified various strategy practices (i.e. practices used to accomplish strategy), many of which, such as meetings (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008), SWOT analyses and workshops (Vaara and Whittington, 2012), formalise strategy processes and are used to plan performances. However, the SAP approach is open to the notion that the actual activities performed as a part of these practices may differ, for example based on new

data about consumers' preferences. Accordingly, actors need to improvise, implying that strategies emerge through everyday practices (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2015; Whittington, 2006).

SAP in strategic communication research

Several seminal studies have broken with the previously dominant fixed and linear focus on strategic communication and have instead adopted a practice approach to strategy. Drawing on the concept of *emergence* (Goldstein, 1999; Mintzberg, 1978), King (2009) claimed that an emergent strategic communication practice should be understood as a recurrent process and a "communicative construct derived from the interaction between reader/hearer response, situated context and discursive patterns" (p. 20). Strategic communication is thus seen as continuously adapted and rebuilt through practices based on reflection and learning, requiring rapid and flexible communication, interaction and processes (Marchiori and Bulgacov, 2012; van Ruler, 2020). Winkler and Etter (2020) claimed that an emergent approach to strategic communication perceives strategy processes as responsive and goal-free, meaning that any consistent pattern of organisational discourse can be interpreted as strategically intended and derived from all employees at all levels of an organisation. Although associated with this emergent approach, an SAP approach to strategic communication suggests that communication processes are predominantly conducted by communication practitioners and various managers in a collaborative manner, and that there is a "co-existence of and integration of functional and emergent understandings" (Winkler and Etter, 2020, p. 56).

However, few strategic communication researchers have systematically drawn on SAP to understand these processes, instead mentioning SAP in passing or advocating notions that have an affinity with it. As an exception, Aggerholm and Asmuß (2016) explicitly drew on SAP to understand how micro-level communication activities about downsizing were legitimated by communication practitioners in relation to macro-level institutionalised organisational strategic communication practices. This implies that the "strategic communicator [is] acting on behalf of the organization in order to fulfil its mission" (Aggerholm and Asmuß, 2016, p. 208) but follows strategic communication practices in doing so, without a predefined plan. Another example is Gulbrandsen (2019), who focused on the simultaneous presence of both formally planned and informally emergent practices of ambiguous but constructive everyday communication work. These understandings of strategic communication practices resonate with Falkheimer and Heide (2018). Although these authors observed that communication practitioners tend to use long-term overall plans, they also noted that they "improvise in order to adapt quickly to a fluid and ever-changing world". The related term *strategic improvisation* (Falkheimer and Sandberg, 2018, p. 254) refers to communication as an interactive process, defined by "space, time, context, power and the actors involved" that communication practitioners navigate and adapt to in an agile fashion. This perspective was exemplified by Ryan and Edlom (2023), who studied strategic improvisation within a marketing campaign for a music brand and found that the created campaign paths attracted consumers while encouraging managers to explore new methods of engagement.

While not referring to SAP, Greenberg and Kates (2014) found that organisations increasingly make strategic communication open and collaborative by inviting and listening to consumers and adjusting their strategies accordingly. Within the music industry, many different actors (communication practitioners, marketers, managers, artists, etc.) participate in communication regarding a music brand and form a central network of practices to build consumer engagement through strategic communication (Choi and Burnes, 2013; Edlom, 2022). In line with this understanding, Gulbrandsen and Just (2016, p. 179) viewed strategic communication as resulting from "negotiation between the organization, the organization's

concrete situation and its stakeholders". This interpretation of strategy also aligns with the concept of agility and associated (managerial) approaches emphasising adaptivity, speed, innovation and iterative work processes (Sherehiy *et al.*, 2007; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018).

In summary, although some studies on strategic communication have used SAP and associated notions, SAP needs to be further integrated into strategic communication research to build an understanding of the tensions between emergence and formalisation and between planning and improvisation in strategic communication practices. With this in mind, we turn to our empirical material and findings.

Methods
To understand the role of strategic communication practices within the music industry, we employed a qualitative and explorative research strategy that involved interviews and ethnography. An ethnographic approach offers a deep and holistic understanding of multifaceted contexts (Hine, 2015), facilitating the observation of practices (Marcus, 1995). Ethnography is an explorative and adaptive method that requires researchers to take a reflexive approach throughout the research process.

The ethnographic part of this study comprised participant observations and interviews and was conducted over three full weeks in March–November 2019 at the regional branch office of a global record company. To ensure anonymity, the country of origin of the studied branch office, the name of the company and the informants' names are not disclosed herein. The branch of the record company employed about 40 people at the time of the study, a little less than half of whom worked in the combined communication and marketing department. The participant observations focused on everyday communication and marketing activities, and we took field notes during or directly after the observations. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 personnel from the record company: twelve with the marketing/communication personnel that focused on the practices they engaged in during their work (which deepened the themes that emerged from the participant observation) and eight with other personnel, such as general managers, data analysts and digital and data managers, to understand the communication context. Theoretical sampling underpinned the selection of interviewees (Strauss and Corbin, 1990); that is, we interviewed people who consented to be interviewed and could fruitfully illuminate on our aim. By combining the interview and observational data, we achieved saturation regarding the role of strategic communication practices within the organisation.

In addition, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with diverse communication practitioners in the music industry. The interviewees were record company representatives working in the management, branding and communication fields, from different levels and sizes of organisations and music artists. The interviews were conducted in Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States between 2016 and 2022 with people (male and female) of various ages and at different professional levels. The respondents were chosen by combining variation selection (representing the width of a phenomenon) with type selection (representing the type within a specific phenomenon) to identify patterns of strategic communication practices in the music industry. We conducted snowball sampling to select interviewees. Although the interview study was conducted independently of the ethnographic study, they were both part of the same larger research project. During project meetings, we realised that the studies could be combined to illuminate the role of strategic communication practices in the music industry. In total, we conducted 40 interviews, each of which lasted between 30 and 65 min. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. We obtained the interviewees' written consent for their participation and ensured their anonymity by not disclosing the name of the companies they worked for and by using pseudonyms. Member checks was used to ensure that we had represented the informants' comments accurately and fairly.

The data analysis followed the systematic approach to inductive concept development presented by Gioia *et al.* (2013). Inspired by the constant comparative method of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), the approach provided rich theoretical descriptions of the context within which phenomena occurred, guided by respondents' thoughts, intentions and actions. As recommended by Gioia *et al.* (2013), the data analysis involved coding the data set, identifying empirical codes and constructing codes that closely resembled the respondents' descriptions. Since the research focus was on strategic communication practices, we coded concrete communication activities that the informants engaged in, such as sending emails, writing marketing plans, discussing social media content for artists and engaging with consumers. The second-order themes were obtained by combining the activities identified in the coding step into groups based on core communication activities, such as release meetings. The aggregate dimensions were constructed based on an analysis of how these core activities constituted strategic communication practices. For example, release meetings and other types of meetings contributed to constructing the strategic communication practice of meetings. In determining the aggregate dimensions, we found that strategic communication practices were characterised by tensions between emergence and formalisation and between planning and improvisation, which informed the formulation of our research aim. The data collection and analysis was an iterative process, meaning that we returned to the field with new areas of interest drawn from the data analysis and fed new data into the ongoing data analysis.

Findings

This section describes the strategic communication practices that communication practitioners in the music industry used recursively to conduct their work. The focus is on the tensions between emergence and formalisation and between planning and improvisation that characterised these practices.

The tension between planning and improvisation in strategic communication practices

A common view on strategy at the investigated record company was, in the words of senior manager Mary, "a perception that we are involved in a constant strategy process . . . Those who work here constantly need to change. What we are striving for is an agile workforce". Hence, the record company's strategy could be seen in SAP terms as realised through emergent strategic communication practices (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2015; Heide *et al.*, 2018; Johnson *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, several respondents in this study referred to strategy as something resembling strategic improvisation (Falkheimer and Sandberg, 2018), characterised by openness, flexibility, reflection and learning.

However, the strategic communication practices we identified in the music industry did not preclude planning. A strategy was always in place, formalised by communication and marketing goals, guidelines and plans. Although strategy did not materialise as a static plan, our findings suggest that strategic communication was planned through everyday strategic communication practices (Falkheimer and Heide, 2018; Gulbrandsen, 2019). This planning involved creating brands and narratives, as well as setting goals and guidelines for the artists. These strategic communication practices commonly involved a team of actors, such as project managers, communication and marketing practitioners, content creators and data analysts, working collaboratively.

As mentioned previously, strategic communication practices are collectively shared and recurring activities in which actors engage to conduct concrete activities. In line with prior SAP (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008) and strategic communication research (Aggerholm and Asmuß, 2016; Gulbrandsen, 2019; Marchiori and Bulgacov, 2012), the participant

observations at the record company revealed that strategic communication was accomplished through recurring meetings, characterised by a tension between planning and improvisation. The recurring weekly meetings at the record company were, for example, team meetings to discuss the marketing and communication activities regarding specific artists, international and local repertoire meetings to coordinate all the upcoming marketing and communication activities for artists, and release meetings to discuss the PR and communication for artists due for release in the coming months. What follows is an excerpt from a participant observation during a release meeting:

> About 18 people from different departments are present at the release meeting. The meeting is led by the marketing executive, John, but many people contribute spontaneously during the meeting. John goes through the "products" listed on an Excel sheet (mostly songs to be released between March 8 and May). He goes through the production status and planned PR and marketing for each artist.

> March 20: John says, "Too many releases at the same time. They will kill each other". One of the communication practitioners adds, "They take streams from each other". "What can we move?" asks a marketer. "Cool that we have so many releases", says someone in Artist & Repertoire. A discussion about changing the schedule for songs/artists follows. (Field notes)

This excerpt exemplifies tension between the planning and improvisation of strategic communication during a weekly release meeting. Strategic communication regarding products was planned using an Excel sheet, but it was questioned (e.g. "Too many releases at the same time"), which necessitated improvisation to change the planning (e.g. "What can we move?").

In addition to attending meetings, the communication practitioners at the record company spent considerable time at their desks in the open-plan office working to realise strategic communication. Here is another excerpt from the field notes:

> A typical working day for the marketing and communication personnel consists of sitting and working on their computers in the open-plan office. Much of this work consists of communicating internally (with colleagues in the office and internationally) and externally (with radio stations, artist managers, Spotify etc.). They conduct this communication mostly via email, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram and phone. (Field notes)

Field notes further revealed that much of the communication work centred on constructing marketing and communication plans for the artists for whom the marketing and communication practitioners were responsible. However, internal and external communication generated a good deal of input to strategic communication, which affected the marketing and communication plans. Thus, working in the office was a strategic communication practice recursively enacted to plan communication work while generating new input that required improvisation. This tension between planning and improvisation characterised the strategic communication practice of working in the office. In addition, the findings suggests that a large proportion of strategic communication for the communication practitioners in the record company involved short- and long-term coordination and planning for different actors and activities. Indeed, the observations and interviews confirmed that the music brand's communication evolved across diverse platforms, whereby strategy was executed through curated steps of action, providing paths for the consumers to follow and activities for them to react to and interact with, as suggested by Ryan and Edlom (2023).

Simultaneously, the consumption of music as well as social media activities was monitored by gathering and analysing consumer data generated by the consumer engagement to help understand the efficacy of the communication efforts and "when it is strategically right to do things" (Magnus, head of local marketing). Hence, gathering and analysing consumer engagement and related data was a core strategic communication practice according to the findings. Data analysis departments have been set up in the music

industry to follow, gather and analyse consumer engagement data from digital consumption platforms, including streaming services platforms, such as Spotify and social media platforms, such as Instagram. To explain the importance of analysing consumer data, Anna (creative head) said, "We are getting feedback all the time on what we are doing. In real time, every minute . . . We need to live in the same world as the target group, to understand it, and inject our presence there". On the one hand, monitoring and following consumers' actions and improvising accordingly were essential aspects of communication practitioners' work. On the other hand, consumer data fed into constant planning, including goal setting and measurement evaluations, during specific marketing campaigns and daily communication work. The collected data told the artists and the record company who was listening to the music, who was engaging around the music brands, and where they came from: "It's about listening at scale and that's where data analytics come into the picture. That's where you look for patterns, and trends, movements and things, you know . . ." (head of insight, music PR firm).

In summary, the findings suggest that tension between planning and improvisation characterised the strategic communication practices of meetings, working in the office and gathering and analysing consumer engagement and related data.

The tension between emergence and formalisation in strategic communication practices

A second core theme of the findings was the tension between emergence and formalisation in strategic communication practices. Three strategic communication practices serving this role were identified: (1) gathering and analysing consumer engagement and related data, (2) collaboration and (3) storytelling. To manage engagement and adapt communication and activities around a music brand, the communication practitioners emphasised the need to be flexible, open to change and participatory in their work (aligning with, for example, Falkheimer and Heide, 2018; Fournier and Avery, 2011; Seiffert-Brockmann *et al.*, 2021; van Ruler, 2021) but also to formalise different types of instructions for strategic communication. Regarding the strategic communication practice of gathering and analysing consumer engagement and related data discussed in the previous section, it was common to hear the interviewees talk about "following" and "engaging" with consumers and "adjusting" communication in a fluid way. Since both social media platforms and music streaming services are borderless in terms of time and place and require the ability to act promptly but according to plan, competencies related to both strategy and agility were needed. Consequently, strategic communication emerged through the practice of gathering and analysing consumer engagement and related data, in line with the emergent perspective of strategic communication (Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2018), because it was "dynamic" (Greenberg and Kates, 2014) and "agile" (van Ruler, 2019, 2021) and facilitated actions concerning consumer's responses. Meanwhile, this constantly emerging strategy fed into sales goals, promotional activities and release dates formalised in marketing plans and Excel sheets, as described in the previous section.

Accordingly, it was clear that all communication practitioners planned, curated and adapted social media content to its reception by monitoring and following the consumers' actions and using related data. According to Tilda (director of artist and label services), "What helps us is our [evaluation] system, from which we get daily and weekly reports on what is trending [Analysing consumer data] helps us react and reformulate". The "daily and weekly reports" formalised consumer data into graphs and key indicators, such as categorised sources of streamed music (e.g. drawn from listening to playlists, algorithmic suggestions or listening to albums). Due to constant monitoring and the fact that consumers' preferences changed constantly, strategies had to be responsive with short timelines. In short, communication strategies emerged constantly: "Music companies are becoming more agile.

They have realised that the digital market makes long-range strategic planning undoable . . . Our plans are for about one month on average", said Sandra, head of brand partnership. The short timelines affected communication activities, according to Ali (head of insight): "You have to continually do interesting things. We are using bite-sized content to create interest, as the challenge is actually to engage people every day, all the time".

Consequently, although the findings indicate that artists and record companies commonly have a broad formal strategy in place, they do not always clearly follow it. This made several respondents in this study speak about a "strategizing approach" characterised by openness, flexibility, reflection and learning in a way that resonated with research on emergent strategic communication (Heide *et al.*, 2018; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015; King, 2009). Tilda (director of artist and label services) said, "If you have a good overall strategy and clear goals, you dare to try something new. You learn all the time by reading comments from our analytics what they [the consumers] are reacting to. And then we plan the campaigns ahead based on that". Hence, the formal strategy, according to Tilda, was not something to strictly follow but more of a sounding board to support improvisation. Related to this was the finding that strategic communication emerged from collaborative practices and joint ventures with a focus on improvisation (cf. Falkheimer and Sandberg, 2018). It was a matter of the firm experimenting to adjust and produce new content that resonated with consumers by collaborating with other actors and platforms. Thomas, head of a major record company, explained it in these words: "When we see a trend on, for example, TikTok, . . . we jointly come up with ideas on how to act in relation to that trend. Everyone gets ownership in that sprint, so that we can act really fast". Such a sprint often started with a meeting in which new goals were set, activities were planned and so forth, thus formalising the process. A consequence of open and collaborative organisational practices was that the strategies and plans could either be followed or changed but always with the ongoing strategic communication processes at the centre.

Communication practitioners also engaged in collaborative strategic communication practices through acts of co-creation with consumer communities in a similar fashion to that shown by Greenberg and Kates (2014). Consumer communities were commonly invited to engage with the music brand in various ways: to react, be active and give "assignments" to others. Anna (creative head) elaborated on the idea of consumer activity: "I really like the things that fly without us planning them. So fun! When fans do something unexpected, and we can react to them and make use of them". Linda, a marketing manager for the studied record company, further emphasised, "When the fans see that the artist is talking directly to them, then the campaign usually works very well". However, she also pointed out, "Being open to unexpected things happening also means letting go of control". John (VP of strategy) claimed that a loss of control owing to consumer engagement was a major strategic tension in the industry; it could be viewed as something "terrible" but also liberating: "Everything they [the consumers] do, I can use to understand them and maybe deliver something that is more relevant". Hence, co-creation with consumers represented a collaborative strategic communication practice through which input for strategic communication emerged. However, it was the strategic communication practitioners themselves who set boundaries for co-creation. Commonly, they used social media, which only allows for certain types of co-creation. For example, observational data from the record company showed that it was common to organise events on an artist's birthday according to a predefined template. This suggests that co-creation with consumers was formalised by communication practitioners to a large extent.

The findings of this study further suggest that communication practitioners engage in the strategic communication practice of storytelling. Barbara, head of PR for the record company, said, "Only a few artists are natural storytellers, and most people don't know what their stories are. Then it's about finding out just that and helping them to communicate it". Hence, although music artists undoubtedly played a central role in telling and finding out their own

story, this involvement needed to be balanced against the goal of this practice to create a useable story that could be inscribed or formalised as text published on, for example, social media, Spotify and the record company's home page. Although some artists managed their social media content by themselves, it was often co-managed by communication practitioners assigned to help the artists align the content with the core stories to be told. Bella (head of social media marketing) explained, "It depends on the agreement and contract with the artist, but also … how good the artists are at managing social media by themselves. Some are brilliant; others need more help". In our interpretation, the risk of too much management is not coming across as personal and authentic. One music band explained that they were given instructions for interviews and social media posts, but said, "We don't follow scripts!" June, the singer, elaborated, "I think you need to … have this sensitivity. I go with the gut feeling and post things and images in the moment that I like, that feel real". Thus, there was tension between authenticity and management in the strategic communication practice of storytelling. Although the strategies for the artists emerged from their authentic experiences, the stories needed to be managed in a way that allowed them to be formalised in text and used in communication about the artist. Indeed, informants commonly referred to the stories about the artists in terms of *artist ID* or *artist DNA,* which underscored the formal aspects of the stories.

In summary, the findings suggest that tension between emergence and formalisation characterises the everyday strategic communication practices of gathering and analysing consumer engagement and related data, collaboration and storytelling.

Discussion and conclusion

SAP and similar approaches to strategy have been recommended for understanding strategic communication (Aggerholm and Asmuß, 2016; Falkheimer and Sandberg, 2018; Gulbrandsen, 2019; Heide *et al.*, 2018; King, 2009; Volk and Zerfass, 2018). The core of SAP is that strategy needs to be understood not as a long-term static plan but as a set of processes and practices (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2015; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Whittington, 2006). We have confirmed this position and contextualised it in the field of strategic communication by showing that strategic communication in the music industry is accomplished through the five strategic communication practices of meetings, working in the office, gathering and analysing consumer engagement and related data, collaborating and storytelling.

We have shown that communication practitioners' activities are guided by strategic communication practices. In line with general practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2019; Shove *et al.*, 2012) and some SAP-informed strategic communication research (Nitschke and Donges, 2018), our study suggests that strategic communication practices foster formalisation and planning among communication practitioners. However, this does not imply that the concrete communication activities of these practices are always identical. Our findings show that, for example, a meeting devoted to planning the release of two different artists can result in quite different communication activities for these artists, due to, for example, the artists' different abilities to use social media. Thus, actual strategies regarding communication performance can differ quite extensively (Marchiori and Bulgacov, 2012), implying that communication is improvised within strategic communication practices (as suggested by Falkheimer and Sandberg, 2018) and that strategy constantly emerges through strategic communication practices (Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016; Nitschke and Donges, 2018). In addition, new strategic communication practices can emerge that have implications for communication activities. Our findings show that gathering and analysing consumer engagement and related data has emerged as a salient strategic communication practice in the music industry because social media use and music streaming generate large amounts of data that were not available when music was primarily consumed via physical media.

Hence, in line with the SAP-informed work of Falkheimer and colleagues (Falkheimer and Heide, 2018; Falkheimer and Sandberg, 2018; Heide *et al.*, 2018), we have shown that strategic communication emerges through strategic communication practices. In particular, we have revealed how the strategic communication emerges through strategic communication practices based on gathering and analysing consumer engagement and related data, collaborating and storytelling. These strategic communication practices oblige communication practitioners to constantly adapt the strategy for an artist or brand in relation to the dynamic environment. We have also made a contribution to SAP-informed strategic communication research by showing that strategic communication practices are characterised by a tension between the emergence and formalisation of strategic communication in, for example, text, marketing plans and Excel sheets. We argue that this tension is essential for enabling communication practitioners to drive strategic communication work forward. We have also contributed to research emphasising the need for strategic improvisation (Falkheimer and Heide, 2018; Falkheimer and Sandberg, 2018; Heide *et al.*, 2018) characterised by openness, flexibility, reflection and learning. Although our study corroborates the stance of this body of research by showing that SAP implies a micro-level focus on strategic improvisation, we have also demonstrated that an SAP approach is able to account for planning—a theme that was touched upon but not elaborated on by Gulbrandsen (2019) and Falkheimer and Heide (2018). The tension between improvisation and planning that we have emphasised is an essential aspect of strategic communication practices.

We also contribute to establishing SAP as an alternative approach to strategic communication, as called for by Volk and Zerfass (2018), among others. Consistent with van Ruler (2020), we argue that strategy is continuously adapted and rebuilt through testing and reflection. Elaborating on the work of Gulbrandsen and Just (2016), we have shown that strategic communication results from negotiation and adaption within the collaborative and co-creative strategic communication practices in which firms and their stakeholders engage. We further claim that the SAP-informed view of strategic communication fits with the concept of agility that has been increasingly adopted by firms, such as the studied record company, in line with the recommendation of communication scholars (Sherehiy *et al.*, 2007; van Ruler, 2021; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018).

Our focus on the strategic communication practice of collaborating, which implies engaging in conversations with consumers and gathering and analysing consumer engagement and related data, aligns with Greenberg and Kates's (2014) finding that organisations treat strategic communication as open and collaborative. Hence, this paper contributes to exploring how strategic communication is adjusted to consumer engagement within the music industry. As Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015) noted, emergence and adaption are some of the "biggest challenges of strategic communication"—a notion that was confirmed in this study. However, some of the strategic communication practices we identified, particularly meetings and working in the office, were intra-organisational in character, suggesting that an open and collaborative approach is generally combined with a more internal and closed approach and that SAP can be used to understand both. It is not the case, as prior research sometimes seems to imply, that a practice perspective on strategy only implies emergence, fluidity, improvisation, change, co-creation, openness and similar things. Rather, strategic communication practices can be quite stable over time, drive formalisation and planning and be closed to "outsiders" (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2019; Shove *et al.*, 2012).

In this vein, the paper also contributes to research on steering strategic communication in agile organisations that are constantly adapting to the environment (Seiffert-Brockmann *et al.*, 2021; van Ruler, 2019, 2020, 2021). In the music industry, as in other industries, tensions arise between internal strategising in the organisation and being open to collaboration and co-creation with stakeholders, specifically consumers. This study has shown that strategic communication practitioners in the music industry perceive it as challenging to encourage, follow, understand and adjust to active consumers on the one hand and to strategically steer them to act in anticipated ways around brands on the other. However, the focus on co-creation

and openness may be superficial, as the goal of strategic communication seems to be to facilitate effective engagement with a brand rather than real co-creation, as suggested by Edlom (2022). As soon as the complexity and pace intensify, so do the management and controlling mechanisms, even in the contexts and narratives of agile organisations.

Furthermore, although we agree with Aggerholm and Asmuß (2016) that it is important to understand how macro-level strategic communication practices structure the micro-level activities of communication practitioners, a core focus of SAP research is to understand the role of micro-level practices *per se* in strategic communication, which we have contributed to doing. In fact, micro-level strategic communication practices may function independently of the macro level (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2019). Therefore, how strategic communication practices are employed to plan and formalise strategic communication and how strategic communication emerges through and is improvised within strategic communication practices needs to be understood in the context focused upon, as we have done in the present study. This also implies that an SAP perspective on strategic communication has the potential to bridge theory and practice. Our study has many concrete practical implications: it shows practitioners what practices facilitate strategic communication, how strategic communication practices facilitate strategic communication, how tensions between emergence and formalisation and between planning and improvisation in strategic communication can be handled, and how agile management of strategic communication can be facilitated through practices.

To further integrate the SAP approach into strategic communication research, we recommend studies that map everyday strategic communication practices in other contexts. What other strategic communication practices exist in addition to the ones we have identified? Studying strategic communication from an SAP perspective within industries other than the music industry is essential because this industry tends to focus on data and platform processes and engaged consumers. We also recommend studies investigating whether strategic communication practices are characterised by tensions other than those we identified. How practitioners can learn and adapt to strategic communication practices is also an important area of research, particularly in agile work environments.

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