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Making the world a better place: The strategic role of communication practitioners in sustainability organisations

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Abstract

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The unusual conditions that prevailed during the last couple of years set the ground for an unprecedented boost in the global agenda of sustainability. This situation has resulted into a growing wave of new organisations that are tackling the main social and environmental challenges of our time while turning them into profitable and innovative business solutions. Communication practitioners working in these companies need to efficiently navigate this market, growing in size and popularity, to provide their companies with the competitive edge needed to stand out. Furthermore, the complex context that surrounds the field of sustainability communication and the often-abstract issues it deals with, stand out for their high levels of uncertainty due to the absence of a lawfully standardised definition of sustainability. For this reason, this study aims to determine the strategic nature of sustainability communication by exploring the way communication practitioners working for small sustainability companies in Sweden, make sense of their role and the context around it. The thesis includes the findings collected through a systemic-constructivist perspective from 12 in-depth semi-structured digital interviews with participants from companies who offered solutions in multiple fields of sustainability. Results show a trend of overinflation of the term that practitioners are trying to stay away from in order to respond to the transparency and accountability demands of increasingly specialised and skeptical consumers and stakeholders. They showed an emotional dimension to a complex and fluid role where they need to strategically navigate overwhelming amounts of constantly changing information emerging from multiple sources that challenges their capability to plan ahead. In general, findings point out an urgent need for practitioners working in sustainability communication to acquire strategic skills to successfully navigate the main challenges of their roles. Current research shows that despite the recent boost in popularity of both fields of sustainability and strategic commu-

nication, the clear global focus on sustainable development is here to stay. For this reason, exploring deeper into the strategic nature of sustainability communication, can open a path into a needed and exponential growth for both fields.

Keywords: sustainability communication, communication practitioner, strategic role, sensemaking theory

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Table of contents

- Introduction..... 1**
 - Study aim and research questions 3
 - Historic and regulatory background 3
 - Relevance and knowledge contribution 5
 - Delimitation 6
 - Disposition 7

- Literature Review 8**
 - Sustainable Development and the FSSD 8
 - Sustainability Communication..... 10
 - The role of communication practitioners 12
 - Synthesis 15

- Theoretical Framework..... 17**
 - Systems Theory..... 17
 - Constructivism Theory 18
 - Sensemaking Theory..... 19

- Methodology 21**
 - Epistemological perspective 21
 - Sample Selection..... 21
 - Data Collection 25
 - Data Analysis 27
 - Trustworthiness, research rigor and reflexivity statement..... 29

- Analysis and Discussion 31**
 - The big picture 32
 - A fuzzy concept 34
 - This is still business 35
 - Find your north star..... 38
 - A role with many hats 40
 - Filters of meaning 41
 - The strategic nature of sustainability communication 42

- Conclusions..... 46**

Contributions to research and practice.....	48
Limitations	49
Future research.....	49
References.....	51
Appendixes	55
Data collection instrument: Semi-structured interview guide	55
Video Invitation	57
Informed consent form.....	58

Introduction

It is no secret that in recent years, the fight against climate change and the work towards sustainable development has been among the most contested topics between politicians, companies, researchers, and professionals (Baumgartner, 2014; Rauter et al., 2017; Silvestre & Fonseca, 2020; Vermeulen & Witjes, 2016). Every day more sustainability professionals and organisations are striving towards one common goal: to bring sustainable development to the corporate world, work towards the well-being of society, and protect the environment. This trend is resulting in a growing wave of young organisations tackling the main social and environmental challenges of our time, and turning it into profitable and innovative business opportunities. These emerging companies offering all sorts of solutions on how to improve life quality and business performance are starting to play a key role in creating the sustainable future all modern societies are aspiring to (Katernyak & Loboda, 2020).

Notwithstanding this wave of new businesses, they seem to be the ones best navigating the uncertainty that surrounds corporate sustainability in particular and sustainable development in general, but their work is not exempt from challenges. Despite the growth of an ongoing discussion on sustainability in many sectors, the concept is still subject to many interpretations due to the lack of a lawfully standardised notion of sustainability (Baumgartner & Rauter, 2017). In particular, the definition of valid sustainable business goals and the most effective strategic ways to implement them is doubtlessly still a major challenge for any type of organisation (Baumgartner & Rauter, 2017). The unavailability of a standardised definition adds to the list of challenges surrounding sustainability and sustainable development that Godemann and Michelsen (2011) mention: “*invisibility of causes, distant impacts, lack of immediacy and direct experience of the impacts, lack of gratification for taking mitigative actions, disbelief in humanity’s global influence, complexity and uncertainty*” (p. 35). Naturally, as a response to these challenges, many companies have emerged: by placing sustainability as their core business value, these companies aim to address the threat that issues like climate change represent for people around the world.

It is therefore crucial for these companies to be very information driven. They need to be aware of the resources they and their main stakeholders are using to operate, and the impact

these have on both the planet and the people around them (Tölkes, 2020). These stakeholders often include suppliers, end-consumers, community organisations, politicians, and even lobbyists or activists that can greatly influence organisational decision making and public opinion. Hence, the great number of stakeholders involved together with the intrinsic abstract nature of sustainability issues, make this doubtlessly a communication problem.

It is pressing for communication practitioners working in these emerging companies to lead and navigate the complex strategic process of mutual understanding and interaction between all relevant stakeholders, both internal and external. They need to efficiently manage the responsibility, challenges, and opportunities that come with this process of mutual understanding. Such a process is precisely what is understood as sustainability communication (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011).

Sustainability communication refers to all mediated and non-mediated communication activities that deal with any of the areas related to sustainability, including social justice, economic development, and the protection of the environment (Kannengießer, 2021). In their role as strategic mediators, communication professionals must be the ones to provide all stakeholders with the opportunity to actively understand and engage with the often-complex topics their companies are working with, like life cycle assessment and carbon footprint traceability (Coombs & Holladay, 2021; Godemann, 2021).

Working with sustainability communication also means developing and implementing strategies such as the creation of compelling and trustworthy content that stakeholders can easily find, analyse, and interact with (Strother & Fazal, 2011). Strategies that go beyond persuasive and honest messages bring visibility to the positive consequences that come from engaging with sustainability and make it both tangible and personally relevant for all those involved (Tölkes, 2020).

As mentioned before by Godemann and Michelsen (2011), the level of success of this strategic mediator role that communication professionals must play in the context of small and young companies, that specialise in sustainability, can often become a key indicator of whether the company is able to continue operating or not (Tölkes, 2020). Furthermore, when considering the high level of dependence these organisations have with the existence of positive synergy with their most relevant stakeholders (Vermeulen & Witjes, 2016).

Study aim and research questions

The combination of complex issues that small and young organisations working with sustainability deal within a field characterised by ongoing change and uncertainty, leads to the aim of this study: **to determine the nature of sustainability communication as a strategic communication function.** This purpose is achieved by gaining an understanding of the way communication practitioners working in these companies make sense of their role and the context around it. This aim leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do communication practitioners working in sustainability perceive the context of the specific sector their company works in?

RQ2: How do communication practitioners working in sustainability make sense of their role in their company?

Historic and regulatory background

To reach the aim of this study, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the context in which this research takes place and to take a look at the bigger picture in which the work of these professionals is embedded.

The year 2020 was the beginning of what the United Nations (UN) called the “Decade of Action”, the last ten years before the deadline marked in Agenda 2030 to reach the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established in 2015 (Zhenmin, 2020). The SDGs are understood as a collaborative response by all member states of the UN to work towards sustainable development and they aim to solve the world’s most serious current challenges, everything from poverty to peace, including the effects of climate change (Zhenmin, 2020).

The SDGs are based on the concept coined by the Brundtland Commission of 1987 that defines sustainable development as the aim to meet the needs of the present without compromising the needs and opportunities of future generations (Signitzer & Prexl, 2007). According to Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs of the UN (2020), the worldwide outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic set back decades of progress towards many of these goals in several countries, making the need for strong collaborative action ever more pressing. In relation to this, Zhenmin (2020) detailed how the pandemic affected all social strata and economic sectors across the globe. In response to this, the UN has called out the need to invest, innovate and improve data collection methods, statistics, and reports that

give clear and comparable information across countries and sectors of society about the progress made in relation to attaining the SDGs (The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2020).

If nothing, the recent and ongoing global pandemic has reignited the urgent need for all societies across the world to regard the work towards sustainable development as a top priority. In the business sector, this has meant unprecedented attention to ESG (environmental, social, and governance) investments that are financing the previously mentioned wave of new companies. The pandemic has shown hope of the progress that can be made in the climate sector, it has made evident the existing social disparities, and has proved the importance of resilience and long-term planning when it comes to governance of both companies and countries. For many investors, this has been an indication of the way future economies must look and the urgent issues that need to be addressed (Wu & Juvyns, 2021).

From a governmental perspective, the European Commission (EC) (the European Union's (EU) politically independent executive arm), has continued and pushed even further its commitment to work towards attaining the SDGs within the framework of Agenda 2030 by implementing several new rules and policies in different areas. As an example, for the business sector, in 2021, the EC updated its non-financial reporting requirements and developed a Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD).

This directive expanded the previous requirements for companies, as well as the amount and type of information that needs to be reported. The non-financial information that companies need to report includes data on environmental and social issues, respect for human rights, and diversity inclusion in terms of gender, age, educational, and professional background (European Commission, 2021).

In order to push even further the collective progress toward the SDGs, despite the alarming setbacks due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the EC is working on the implementation of a detailed reporting standard. For companies in all member states of the EU, this means adhering to a detailed set of instructions on how to measure, present and communicate their impact on both the environment and society. This reporting standard is planned to be adopted during the last semester of 2022 (European Commission, 2021).

According to the European Commission (2021), the goal of these documents is to assist all relevant stakeholders in evaluating the non-financial performance of organisations while promoting a responsible approach to business. For Signitzer and Prexl (2007), this is what corpo-

rate sustainability is all about, the process of planned and strategic management towards a balance between profit, social justice, and the protection of the environment. All the previously mentioned factors, during the past three years, have accelerated exponentially the growth of the sustainability sector, giving it a unique momentum that many entrepreneurs are trying to seize.

Relevance and knowledge contribution

The previously stated historic, environmental, political, and regulatory context is putting extraordinary pressure on companies across Europe to find the right solutions to face these challenges in a timely manner. For many organisations, complying with these requirements has become the key to ensuring their survival, placing the topic of sustainability at the core of their main business goals (Signitzer & Prexl, 2007).

For many others already on track, this setting has provided the perfect conditions to truly scale up. Small companies offering services in sustainability are experiencing an unprecedented momentum that provides this study with a unique relevance. Within the field of sustainability communication, both companies and practitioners need to adapt and evolve. Sustainability communication now, more than ever, needs to be strategic.

Several studies point to the need to develop further the field of sustainability communication both from a practical and theoretical perspective. They point to the need for purposeful research and strategy-driven sustainability communication, but very few mention a strategic communication approach to the field (Allen, 2016; Godemann & Michelsen, 2011; Signitzer & Prexl, 2007; Tölkes, 2020).

Thomas and Stephens (2015) explain how strategic communication as a concept has become the meeting point between management strategy and communication and present it as a bridging activity that needs to be further institutionalised. The same article refers to Zerfass et al.'s (2018) definition of strategic communication as purposeful communication efforts aimed at attaining an organisation's main goals. A definition that points to a core need of all businesses, especially at a starting stage, where the common shortage of human and financial resources leads to an even larger demand for a creative and strategic approach to every decision.

Zerfass et al. (2018) add to this idea by mentioning the new role that communication is playing in contemporary organisations of all sizes, having a larger emphasis on strategic decision-making, in contrast to a previous more tactical and supportive role. Within the context of this study looking at small and young organisations working with sustainability, this goal-oriented and strategic decision-making role, as previously mentioned, becomes increasingly relevant.

Supported by these ideas, Baumgartner and Rauter's (2017) paper on the strategic perspectives of corporate sustainability management becomes especially significant for this thesis. The article provides definitions for key concepts like strategy and strategic, that will be further developed in the literature review chapter. Baumgartner and Rauter (2017) also claim that if approached accordingly, the strategic relevance of sustainability management, (or in the case of this study, sustainability communication) can be significantly improved and have a sizeable impact on both the business success of an organisation and its influence toward sustainable development (Baumgartner & Rauter, 2017).

Delimitation

This study takes into consideration the specific context of Sweden, as an important member of the EU; a country known for its remarkably long and leading history of international commitment to co-create sustainable development and promote sustainable solutions in the private sector (Business Sweden, n.d). This national approach has led to the emergence of many small and young companies offering a great variety of solutions in the field of sustainability in order to push the government's sustainable development agenda even further.

In the case of this study, these solutions included: software platforms that can trace aspects ranging from ethical work standards of raw material suppliers, the wellbeing and performance of workers, food and water waste reduction, the carbon footprint of fashion items, food ingredients, and even individuals' lifestyles. These platforms can also come in the form of sustainability focused e-commerce and communication sites that pay great attention to strategic partnerships, interaction and engagement of users. Another relevant sector focused on developing plant and fungi-based alternatives to traditional meat and dairy products to reduce the climate impact of the food industry and making it

more efficient. A final sector concentrated its efforts on hardware development, tangible machines dedicated to clean and optimise processes, often related to water (i.e laundry and water treatment plants).

This thesis looks into the experience of communication practitioners in charge of the communication of young and small Swedish companies whose core business is based on at least one of the SDGs established in the Agenda 2030. A comprehensive description of the criteria used to select participants, along with a detailed matrix of the selected participant's profiles can be found in the methodology chapter.

Disposition

This research started by presenting relevant highlights of the context in which it is embedded. The paper continued to determine the aim and research questions that guide the study, as well as its relevance and knowledge contribution to the field of strategic communication. With this information outlined, a clear delimitation of the boundaries of this thesis sets the ground to provide a comprehensive overview of relevant previous research literature. The theoretical framework that guided this study is followed by the methodology chapter, analysis of the collected data, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

In order to determine the nature of sustainability communication as a strategic communication function, this section looks into discussions and ideas from recent publications in the fields of strategic communication, sustainability communication and strategic management that support or challenge this claim in various ways. These recent publications, on a snowball effect, led to their respective references in order to dig deeper into relevant publications on the given topic.

This literature review looks into the way researchers have framed key ideas applicable for this thesis such as the definitions of sustainable development, sustainability communication, strategic communication, and the roles of communication practitioners in contemporary organisations.

Sustainable Development and the FSSD

Following the established structure of this study, looking into the particulars surrounding the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development is key to understanding the role that strategic communication plays in it. As mentioned before, one of the most cited definitions for sustainable development is found in the Brundtland Commission of 1987 which claims that humanity needs to work towards “*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” (Broman & Robert, 2017. p 81).

Baumgartner and Rauter (2017) critique this description by claiming that it offers no clear guidance on how to achieve the purpose it is referring to. They claim that the Brundtland definition leaves too much room for uncertainty, which leads to the underestimation of the challenges that the SDGs address, the urgency required to tackle them, and the possible consequences that come from a lack of timely action.

As a response, Baumgartner and Rauter (2017) refer to Broman and Robert’s (2017) Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD). The FSSD is presented as

an effort to develop a strong comprehensive tool to work with sustainable development. The framework includes a five-level model with steps on how to address sustainable development in organisations, strictly connected to an eight-principles definition of sustainability, and an operational procedure for organisations to follow towards the co-creation of strategic decisions and transitions towards sustainability (Broman & Robert, 2017).

Broman and Robert's FSSD (2017) attempts to reduce the existing uncertainty that often gravitates around the concept of sustainable development by detailing a set of criteria that claim all its statements should be "*necessary, sufficient, general, concrete and non-overlapping*" (p. 23). In order to gain a deeper understanding of their proposed framework of sustainable development, Broman and Robert's FSSD (2017) key components are detailed further on.

The FSSD's five-level model starts by paying attention to organisations from a systems perspective, "*its dependence on the general regional and global support systems as well as how it is nested in value chains and other stakeholder networks and how it is affected by unsustainability impacts*" (Broman & Robert, 2017, p. 22). The FSSD understands organisations the same way as Cheney et al. (2011), namely as a collection of systems, a collaboration between the parts and the whole that cannot be understood without the other, therefore with positive and negative impacts that affect all parts in one way or the other.

The second level looks at the definition of organisational vision statements that need to be framed within the FSSD's eight sustainability principles, their core purpose, values, and goals. These elements allow companies working with the FSSD to arrive at a unique definition of sustainable development success. The third, fourth, and fifth levels of the model provide guidelines to develop a strategic plan, specific actions to work with, and tools to analyse, measure, and reassess the progress towards the company's defined success (Broman & Robert, 2017).

The eight principles break down the specific needs of the present that should be addressed and how they can be met without compromising the opportunity of future generations to do the same. Divided into two subcategories, the principles present how nature and humanity need to be protected: Nature by limiting the extraction of lithospheric

substances like fossil carbon and metals, limiting the production of human-made substances like CFCs, so they don't end up in the atmosphere, soil or nature in general; and of course safeguarding and protecting freshwater sources, soils, and the world's biodiversity from deteriorating by mismanagement or manipulation of any sort. The second half of the principles provides guidelines that indicate that no human should be subject to structural obstacles to their health, societal influence, possibility to obtain education, impartiality, and individual or collaborative meaning-making (Broman & Robert, 2017).

The FSSD (Broman & Robert, 2017) surely provides a more comprehensive and tangible perspective of sustainable development for individuals, governments, and organisations to work with. It also reinforces the need for a strategic and holistic approach when working with sustainability challenges. It is important to highlight that this framework can be used by both existing companies looking to become more sustainable and by companies founded on principles of sustainable development as a baseline to improve their existing business models.

In a more recent study, Ruggerio (2021) elaborates on the need for any conceptual model intending to work with sustainability (like the FSSD) to take into consideration the complex nature of most socio-ecological systems (SES) and its financial, environmental, social, and political dimensions. Such models should also consider generational equity and the continuous feedback between every SES and their broader context. Ruggerio (2021) also criticises projects, products and programs that are referred to as being sustainable for demonstrating a lack of understanding of the meaning and complexity of the concept. He explains that sustainability can only be applied in a significant way when taking into consideration the singularities of the system it is embedded in, never in a purely abstract way.

Sustainability Communication

The existing debate on the mere definition of the previous concepts, brings to the table the key role that communication plays in the matter. Several studies, already mentioned in the introduction section of this research (Coombs & Holladay, 2021; Godemann & Michelsen, 2021; Kannengießer, 2021; Strother & Fazal, 2011; Tölkes, 2020), present relevant ideas about what sustainability communication is about. For this research, sustainability communication will be understood as all communication efforts that in one

way or the other deal with at least one of the principles stated in the FSSD (Broman & Robert, 2017) or one of the 17 SDGs (The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2020).

Understanding that the previous remains a very broad definition of sustainability communication, as presented in the delimitation section, this thesis looks into the sustainability communication practised in small companies whose core business model is based on at least one of the SDGs. This statement leads to the assumption that the challenges and opportunities that come from working with sustainability communication are relevant throughout all communication activities of these organisations.

These challenges, as presented before, translate into a working environment filled with uncertainty, which according to Signitzer and Prexl (2007) can only be overcome with the use of effective and engaging communication built on mutual understanding. They point out that most communication practitioners dealing with sustainability issues face a particular type of problem: the highly abstract nature of the biggest challenges for both society and the environment often makes them either invisible or deeply misunderstood by a large portion of the public.

Though it can be argued that this landscape has surely improved since the article was published fifteen years ago; and more people are becoming significantly knowledgeable on these topics, sustainability communication as a field, now more than ever requires the action of highly skilled and proactive communication professionals. Even though sustainability as a topic has been debated for around forty years, as stated in the introduction chapter, the COVID-19 pandemic marked an inflection point that truly pushed the sustainability agenda further in multiple fronts (Wu & Juvyns, 2021).

This inflection point has also stressed the key role that communication practitioners play as the ones closest to the organisation's main stakeholders, and therefore the best suited to understand the specific level of expertise and sophistication needed when dealing with said challenges (Signitzer & Prexl, 2007). Baraka (2014) presents, in a very straightforward way, what communication practitioners should focus on when communicating sustainability issues: make the message interesting for its specific target audience, mention both numbers, performance indicators, and a good story that appeals to both the rational and emotional audiences, and get constant stakeholder feedback,

both internal and external. This last aspect alludes to the continuously evolving nature of sustainability communication.

Though Baraka's (2014) recommendations can appear superficial, his emphasis on the role of communication regarding sustainability work remains valuable: an enabler to create trust, especially when it comes to brand value and the overall perception of an organisation. Even though Baraka's (2014) work doesn't come from the research field of communication but from a business perspective, it is clearly aligned with adjectives and phrasing found in studies, books, and research whose main field is communication. Studies that share one core idea: a strategic, effective, and results-driven approach to the practice of sustainability communication, can carry significant economic and social benefits for both the organisation and its surrounding environment (Allen, 2016; Signitzer & Prexl, 2007; Strother & Fazal, 2011; Tölkes, 2020).

Baumgartner and Rauter (2017) elaborate on the strategic role that sustainability communication can have for companies, by enhancing their image and reputation while reducing the negative impacts of its action on both society and the environment. Communication doubtlessly plays a key role as a "*symbolically mediated action, with humans constructing their reality on the basis of perceptions and experiences*" (Godemann & Michelsen, 2016, p. 6). Godemann and Michelsen (2016) explain how communicators serve a strategic role in allowing the mutual understanding of the different stakeholders involved; including institutions, individuals, media, politics, communities, and of course businesses on both a local and international scale. This leads to the following section of this literature review: The role of communication practitioners.

The role of communication practitioners

Signitzer and Prexl (2007) refer to the question of whether environmental engineers or sustainability managers should be the ones working with sustainability communication due to the high level of specialised knowledge required to have a deep understanding of the different issues involved and what sustainability is truly. They answer that public communication practitioners, from their role as mediators of meaning (Godemann and Michelsen, 2011) should be the ones with the proper competence to face the previously mentioned challenges, in collaboration with people from other areas.

This question brings up the need to further clarify what the communication practitioner role can look like in contemporary organisations. For this purpose, the categories of roles provided by Steyn (1999) serve as a relevant baseline. Steyn (1999) talks about the role of the strategist, placed at the macro level of the organisation and as part of the top management group; then the manager, placed at a more functional and meso level, followed by the technician at the operational level of the company.

On the other hand, Fieseler et al. (2015), claim that the evolution of the roles of communication practitioners, in contrast with past studies, indicates a progression towards more nuanced differences, and blurred lines between one and the other. This could be related to the previously mentioned tendency in contemporary organisations to see communication as more “*strategic and decisional, as opposed to tactical and supportive*” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 489).

This trend of an ongoing change in the role of communication practitioners in contemporary organisations also relates to Cheney et al.'s (2011) description of post-bureaucratic organisations. Such organisations are characterised by having a more horizontal structure, being more project-centred, having a higher level of adaptability in their market environment, and comprised of members with higher education levels that allow more independence and role flexibility within the organisation (Cheney et al. 2011).

For this study, Cheney et al.'s (2011) account of post-bureaucratic organisations served as a description of the characteristics taken into consideration when selecting the companies' participants work for. On an individual practitioner level, Steyn's (1999) role categorization, more than a place on the organisation's structure, was understood as dimensions of the highly flexible and adaptable role that communication practitioners must often play in small and young organisations.

To define sustainability communication as a strategic communication function, this research pays deeper attention to the strategic dimension of the role. According to Steyn (1999), the strategist must be able to identify the most relevant stakeholders, their priorities and needs; identify possible organisational challenges and opportunities, and thoroughly scan the environment to predict changing conditions and proactively plan communication accordingly. Together with the company's decision-making group, this

information is translated into the corporate strategy, which later becomes the basis for the strategic communication plan. After this point, the communication manager and the technician come into play to further develop and execute the tactics outlined in the communication plan (Steyn, 1999). Depending on the size and structure of the organisation, this process can involve one or several communication practitioners, up to a whole department.

Developing the strategic dimension of communication even further, Zerfass et al. (2018) present one of the most recent and comprehensive definitions of strategic communication. As a novel field, strategic communication is being introduced as an integrative framework where public relations, organisational communication, and marketing communication, among other related areas, can meet and present an alternative solution to many of the current challenges of the industry (Heide et. al, 2018)

Falkheimer and Heide (2018) explain how the field of strategic communication has its foundations in the sociology of communication has, focusing on how meaning is shared, transferred, and co-created between individuals. They continue by breaking down the concept of strategic communication. First, they explain how the concept of communication and its relationship between both humans and organisations can be understood as the relationship between fish and water: it is the substance that supports both its environment and its entire existence. Falkheimer and Heide (2018) continue to talk about the concept of strategy, by criticising the traditional definition that refers to a set of planned actions that lead to a preferred outcome, something perceived as simple and merely instrumental. Most often, the concept of strategy is focused on an organisation's capability to adapt, its comparable benefits, and overall performance in contrast with its competition (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018)

For Baumgartner and Rauter (2017) strategy is understood as a way of using the existing resources, to decide where an organisation should be, what it wants to achieve and how it is going to operate to reach that goal. It implies the need to reach a common and measurable definition of success and the collaboration of all actors involved to reach that overall goal. This purpose-driven approach to communication and the potential it has, to create business value, together with a continuously growing and evolving set of tools that practitioners can access to achieve their goals, seems to be key aspects of the rapid expansion of the field (Volk et. al, 2017). This idea is aligned with the discussion

presented in previous sections on how a strategic approach to sustainability communication seems to be the best way to navigate the complex debate and ambiguity surrounding the topic of sustainability.

Finally, Molleda (2010), proposes a different and more abstract dimension of the role that communication practitioners must play regardless of their position within an organisation: professional storytellers. As mentioned before, when it comes to sustainability communication, practitioners must be able to create mutual understanding between stakeholders to reduce the uncertainty that characterises many of the issues their organisations work with. Once more, communicators must be mediators of meaning (Gode-mann & Michelsen, 2011).

Molleda (2010) explains how communication professionals should be the ones in charge of finding and sharing the authentic stories about authentic people that today's audiences are craving in order to feel identified with the problems they are presented with. Stories that create the close emotional connection that is so hard to find in most sustainability issues. Stories extracted from the core of every product, service, company, and client, that are able to bring individuals and companies closer to their goals.

The previously mentioned set of skills and characteristics provided by different researchers serves as a strong argument to support Signitzer and Prexl's (2007) claim that –strategic- communication practitioners should be the ones best suited to manage the main challenges of working with sustainability communication.

Synthesis

Most literature included in this section shows sustainable development and sustainability communication as constantly evolving and growing fields in a unique historic, societal, and political context increasing in popularity. This attention has shed light on a rather long trajectory that until very recently had passed under the radar for many organisations.

The renewed popularity of these topics is reigniting a debate around its vague and abstract nature, and how best to navigate it from a communication perspective in times where consumers across the planet are demanding detailed action and accountability. This debate is making both organisations and individuals question long established

structures and methods; beyond the topic of sustainability, many of the studies presented show an ongoing transformation of contemporary organisations, the internal and external dynamics, and especially the role communication practitioners are playing.

Theoretical Framework

This section includes a description of the systemic and constructivist perspective used as a bigger theoretical lens to understand the highly complex background in which this study is embedded. It continues by characterising sensemaking theory as the main theory that guides the structure of the methodology section and the analysis of the results.

Systems Theory

According to Infante et al. (1997), systems theory contributes to the field of communication by understanding it as an integrated process highly dependent on its environment. They define a system as “*a set of interdependent units which work together to adapt to a changing environment*” (Infante et al. 1997, p. 90) even though a system can take many forms, for the purpose of this study, the theory is applied in the context of organisations.

For Cheney et al. (2011), organisations are seen as systems of interconnected synergies that collaborate and cannot be understood without the other; systems that need to be open in order to survive. This also means that whenever one of these units is removed, the whole system is altered. For this reason, when analysing a system, researchers must both look into individuals and the relationships and interactions between them. For Infante et al. (1997) this is the nonsummativity property of systems: the whole is much more than sums of the contributions of each individual.

From a communication perspective in organisations, an open system is one that interacts with its environment by receiving inputs, transforming them, and sending outputs back into the environment. Each of these systems are hierarchical, which means they are composed of smaller subsystems and combined with others to form suprasystems (Infante et al. 1997). In the context of sustainability communication, the systems perspective is key to understanding both organisations and their relationship with the environment that surrounds them. Talking about sustainability in any context, according to Ruggerio (2021), needs to be system-bound, since sustainability can only be understood

taking into consideration the complexity of each socio-ecological system and any other approach should be considered a misunderstanding of the term.

Infante et al. (1997) also point out to the property of equifinality for systems, the capacity to take many different paths to reach one same end state. This perspective and system theory in general, provides the flexibility needed when studying communication phenomena. The theory tries to take away specific biases and constraints by focusing on the interactions between the parts, understanding that communication is culture and context bound, therefore always findings remain situation specific.

Infante et al. (1997) highlight relevant criticisms to this theory, by pointing to how costly and time consuming it can be to truly attempt to analyse every angle involved. For this reason, its explanatory power often remains overly broad without shedding too much light on the reason why things happen and the role of each individual in it. Understanding this criticism is very relevant for this study and it is applied by using this theory as a broader general perspective and not as a specific theoretical tool to analyse the data collected.

Constructivism Theory

The other broader theoretical lens used in this study is constructivism as an important theory of knowledge and learning. Örenturk et al. (2004) differentiate between cognitive constructivism and social constructivism; they explain how the first stresses the constructive activity of the individual while attempting to make sense of their world and pays deeper attention to learning activities focused on individual discovery. On the other hand, social constructivism emphasises the collective actions that take place within a unique social and cultural context during the learning process, it acknowledges the contributions of others. For this study, as mentioned before, within the field of sustainability communication, the social construction of reality, bound to a specific context is key to a thorough understanding of the problem at hand.

For Burlinson and Rack (2008), from a constructivist perspective, individuals are active sense-makers that interpret their experiences and act upon them. These interpretations often come from different sources like past experiences or inherited from the social group through language or systems of values. These sources, used as the basis for inter-

pretations are known as personal constructs, and each individual counts with different sets of these constructs that are used in different situations.

Furthermore, constructivism places communication at the centre, and sees it as intentional and strategic, as the mean through which these social constructs are created, kept, and evolved, and individuals are able to reach their goals (Burlison & Rack, 2008; Godemann & Michelsen, 2011). When individuals are able to add a great level of complexity to these social constructs, they often become especially good at understanding people, relationships and actions. This talent allows them to be highly skilled at collecting and organising information in social situations which enables them to make better judgments and decisions. This description fits the profile needed for communication practitioners to perform their role needed as mediators of meaning when dealing with sustainability communication (Burlison & Rack, 2008; Godemann & Michelsen, 2011).

In general, constructivism as a theory of knowledge provides the tools to understand the social, abstract, and fluid dimensions of the main constructs that individuals deal with on a daily basis. It allows us to explore the nature, background and consequences of individual differences in communications skills, and explains how each individual builds their own reality based on past experiences, laying a meaningful weight on the cultural and biographic dimension of how knowledge is perceived. (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011).

Together, a systemic-constructivist perspective provides a continuously open, complex, and ever-evolving picture of the context in which this study and its participants are embedded. They provide an understanding of the multiple layers and combinations of elements that match together in a specific way to provide the unique findings of this study.

Sensemaking Theory

For Weick (1995), sensemaking is the thinking process that helps humans make sense of different phenomena. It is a constructive process that makes use of standards and rules for both perceiving and interpreting experiences that are often found in cultural settings. It is considered as much an individual as a collective activity.

To further clarify the concept, Weick (1995) points out seven key aspects that characterise sensemaking. (1) It is grounded in identity construction: since each person is com-

posed and constructed on several identities, they are bound to make sense of different situations in different ways depending on the role they are taking. (2) It requires retrospectivity: being able to look back and evaluate a process or an event is highly dependent on individual experiences, but it always helps to make the past clearer. (3) Environment dependent: an individual and its environment are constantly influencing each other in different ways. This continuous interaction is a rich source of meaning making. (4) Sensemaking is a social process: to collect and make sense, often means to pay attention to the humans around you, their social cues, ideals, stereotypes, etc. (5) Sensemaking is continuous, and ongoing, it never ends. (6) Sensemaking is selective: the stimulants that each individual decides to focus on often shape their interests and unconscious behaviour. (7) Sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy: most humans are cognitively lazy, and resist extensive research efforts, for this reason the first answer found is often the one that sticks regardless of how accurate it is or not.

In the context of this study, for communication practitioners in charge of the communication of small and young companies working with sustainability, sensemaking tasks like environmental scanning and issue interpretation are key for accurate and strategic decision making. Maitlis (2005) explains how these tasks are particularly relevant in unstable contexts, where practitioners need to keep and communicate a coherent understanding of the changing phenomena at stake in a clear way that enables sensegiving for the stakeholders involved. In the context of sustainability communication, where uncertainty and ambiguity often feel like the norm, sensemaking is the main tool practitioners use to create rational and compelling accounts of the issues they work with (Maitlis, 2005). For this reason, sensemaking, understood as a process of social construction, is the main theory applied to determine the strategic nature of sustainability communication by asking practitioners how they make sense of their role and the context around it.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative abductive analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews. The methodology chapter starts by elaborating on the previously mentioned epistemological perspective of the study, followed by the research design, data collection method, and method of analysis. As a reminder, the two research questions aimed to answer during the analysis of the data collected are the following:

RQ1: How do communication practitioners working in sustainability perceive the context of the specific sector their company works in?

RQ2: How do communication practitioners working in sustainability make sense of their role in their company?

Epistemological perspective

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2017), a key idea that characterises all qualitative studies is that humans construct their reality by interacting with their social environments. As presented in the previous chapter, this study places special attention on the context that surrounds the way participants make sense, interpret and socially construct their life experiences. This thesis aims to build an understanding of the way communication practitioners in small and young sustainability companies make sense of their roles in order to determine the strategic communication nature of their work through a systemic-constructivist perspective on reality. For Merriam and Tisdell (2017) this is what qualifies as an exploratory qualitative study.

Sample Selection

Since this is explorative qualitative research that aims to gain a deeper understanding of the stated problem through key and valuable insights, the best-suited sampling method is a non-probable, purposeful sample that allows the selection of individuals whose personal experience is the most relevant for the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017).

The selection of the sample started with a Google search typing the key *phrase sustainability start-ups in Sweden*. After consulting with professionals in the field and going through several sources and online lists, the top ten most mentioned and recommended companies that fit the defined criteria were selected. The companies, and whenever possible, the person in charge of communication, were contacted either through LinkedIn or by email. After this point, a snowball sampling strategy was used. This method involved the selection of the first few participants that fit the criteria, who were asked for references and direct recommendations to reach more possible participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017).

In order to maximise the possibilities within the time constraints of the study, a digital version of the snowball sampling strategy was also applied. The strategy involved following the selected companies and participants in their different social media and websites, interacting and engaging with their content in order to alert the digital algorithms of these platforms to suggest companies and professionals that share a similar profile. Simultaneously, other knowledgeable sources like investors and entrepreneurs were reached to provide further contacts and recommendations.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) mention that an exploratory qualitative study, because of its nature, can provide valuable insights and findings with a relatively small sample between 10 and 15 participants, that are able to provide multiple valuable insights into the data and findings of the study. Taking into consideration the time restrictions and the particularity of the profile needed to fit the criteria, the achieved sample size of the study consists of twelve participants.

The criteria used to select the participants of this study included:

- Participants graduated from a university in a communication-related field who are able to provide an extensive, professional and in-depth analysis of their roles and work environment.
- In order to provide a comprehensive picture of their role as communicators, participants are expected to be formally appointed to a communication-related position.

- In the case of companies with more than one appointed communicator, the interview is conducted with the person with the highest level of responsibility to gain a clearer understanding of the strategic dimension of the role.
- To ensure participants have a clear idea of the main challenges, opportunities, and insights of their role and the context in which the company they work at is embedded, they are expected to have been performing in the same position for the same company for at least one year.
- Participants need to be fluent in English to be able to communicate their thoughts and ideas accordingly for the purpose of this study.

Furthermore, the young and small Swedish companies working with sustainability that participants are expected to be working at for at least one year, are understood as:

- Young companies are considered those founded between 2012 and 2019. For this study, working with young companies means working with entities that were founded with a clear idea of what sustainable development entails.
- Small companies are those that have between 10 and 100 employees and at least one of them is the previously described graduated professional fully dedicated to working with communication. For this thesis, working with small and young companies means working with flexible organisations that consciously try to minimise hierarchy, companies where the work of each individual is not lost in bureaucracy and has an authentic potential to make an impact within the organisation.
- Regardless of how many geographical locations the companies are operating in, they are considered Swedish if they are legally registered and currently operating in Sweden. This criterion aims at collecting participants that share one geographical context, with similar market demands, trends, and limitations to be able to draw similarities and comparisons between ideas whenever possible.
- The companies selected are considered to work with sustainability if their business model is based directly or indirectly on one or more of the SDGs.

Within the broader field of sustainability, the participants of the totality of the sample are expected to work in companies from a variety of industries and market niches.

The final sample selection was not able to meet the total of the defined criteria thoroughly due to the peculiarity of the selected profile and time restrictions of this study. Many of the participants, as the person in charge of communications in the company, did not have formal education in communication and had not been in the company more than a year; also, despite being founded in 2017, the smallest company was composed of only three members.

The participants and companies selected for this study belonged to business sectors that include: green technology, digital social platforms, sustainable marketplace, food technology, fashion supply chain traceability, sustainable laundry solutions, as well as platform for diversity and inclusion through food. The variety of fields that the selected participants came from provided a wide array of experiences and perspectives that added to a more complete picture towards an understanding of the strategic dimension and challenges of their role.

To provide a clear overview for the reader, the following matrix details the educational background of the twelve participants, their years of experience, their current position at the company they work for, the main product or service the company offers and its main target audience.

	Background	Current Position	Product / Service	Main target audience
1.	Engineering and entrepreneurship. Empirical marketing experience. -6 years of experience	Chief marketing officer (CMO)	Software to calculate the carbon footprint of food	Food chain restaurants, hotels, and corporate canteens
2.	Biology and Environmental Communication. -4 years of experience	Head of Climate Dialogue	Digital platform for Climate communication	Potential partners: individuals, big corporations, politicians, etc
3.	Behavioral Science and Strategic Communication . -5 years of experience	Chief marketing officer (CMO)	Digital holistic tool to improve occupational wellbeing	Human Resources managers
4.	Psychology, neuroscience, graphic design, product specialist, brand manager. -6 years of experience	Communication and brand manager	Micro protein food ingredients from mycelium	Supermarket chains, restaurants, chefs, and other food technology companies
5.	Entrepreneur in Communication, angel investor, and marketing consultant. +15 years of experience	Temporary CMO and angel investor	Vegan alternatives to dairy and meat products	Supermarkets, coffee shops, restaurants, end consumers (40-60 years old)
6.	Mechanical engineer, sales, and corporate communications. +10 years of experience	Founder and head of corporate communications	A machine to clean the surface of water	Construction companies, oil refineries, paper mills, etc
7.	Commerce management, business administration, HRs, and marketing. -4 years of experience	Head of communications and marketing	Digital tool to calculate, reduce and educate on food waste	School canteens, restaurants, chefs
8.	International development, microfinance, diversity, and inclusion. -4 years of experience	Head of product and marketing, Co-Founder	Lunch food service focused on diversity and inclusion for immigrant chefs	Co-working office spaces, diversity and inclusion managers
9.	Food systems, nutrition, marketing, content editor, lead generation. -8 years of experience	Global marketing communication manager	Digital fashion supply chain traceability platform	Raw material suppliers and big fashion brands
10.	International retail, marketing in fashion. +10 years of experience	CEO, head of marketing, and co-founder.	Digital impact platform and sustainable marketplace	Sustainable brands and sustainable consumers
11.	Visual communication and change, graphic design, social media manager. -4 years of experience	Marketing and digital communications designer	A box to attach to laundry machines that collects microplastics and saves water	Real state firms, hotels
12.	Marketing, communications. +15 years of experience	Co-founder and co-lead of communications	Digital tool to calculate carbon footprint, education, and climate financing	Individuals and companies looking to calculate their carbon footprint

Data Collection

According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), interviews are the most common data collection method in qualitative studies. They are seen as the ideal tool to help the researcher understand the world from the participants' perspective, how they make sense of their experiences and how they interpret them. Since the aim of this study is to determine the nature of sustainability communication as a strategic communication function by understanding the way communication practitioners make sense of their role, individual interviews are the preferred method of data collection.

For this study, this research understands interviews as conversations with a purpose that should flow in a natural way and leave room for the participant to elaborate on the aspects perceived as most relevant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). For this reason, the individual interviews have a semi-structured format with open questions that leave room for the conversation to flow in a natural way.

The data collection instrument used to conduct the individual interviews is a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 1) aimed at finding answers to the research questions of the study. The semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions left

room for participants to elaborate on what they felt was most relevant and for the researcher to ask follow-up questions when required (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017).

Every item in the guide aimed to find an answer to either one or both research questions while focusing on the sensemaking process of the participants and their individual experiences. For example: “*Tell me a little bit about your role: How does a regular workday look like for you?*” The purpose of this question is closely connected to the retrospective dimension of sensemaking theory where participants can look back at their past experiences and select the aspects that they find most relevant to share.

The guide starts with general reflections about the company their work for, its competencies, and current challenges. Later, it continues to turn the reflection towards more detailed and personal experiences of their role, its characteristics, personal challenges, and perceived key skills to have. Since the participants were physically located in different spaces, and with the aim of minimising transportation costs and optimising time, all interviews were taken as digital meetings that (with the consent of the participants) allowed for an easy and non-intrusive video recording. These recordings were later turned into transcripts that served as the main source of data for the analysis.

The potential participants who fit the selected criteria were invited to become a part of the study through a short one-minute video introducing the researcher, the topic of the thesis, and the aim of the interview (Appendix 2). The purpose of the video format was to stand out from other similar requests that these professionals often receive on a regular basis, to create a more attractive first impression, to add a human face and unique tone to the study, and finally, to open an initial opportunity to create rapport with the potential subjects. The video was shared through a direct message on the social media platform LinkedIn, or through email when available. At the end of this study, 25 professionals from different companies were contacted of which 12 interviews were successfully carried out.

After a positive response, the participants received a confidentiality consent form indicating the specific technicalities of the interview, the link to a Zoom meeting with the agreed date and time, and further details regarding the study. The consent form also detailed that the content of the resulting recorded video from the interview would only be used by the researcher to create a transcript that excluded the identity of both the

participant and the company he or she is working for. The participants agreed timely with either a signed copy or a recorded agreement to proceed with the interview as planned. To read the detailed content of the confidentiality consent form please see Appendix 3.

The interviews were scheduled one by one and after each session, the resulting video was played back to an automatic transcript generator while the researcher took notes of initial impressions and possible adjustments to be made for the following interview. After the automatic transcript was completed, the researcher went through the content once more. This time the video played in the background, making the necessary pauses for the researcher to correct any possible mistakes and make the required edits to extract the most valuable information and give the transcript content a more formal written format.

To make the most of the data collection phase, two pilot interviews were performed to gather feedback and create a revised version. The pilot interviews were conducted with participants with a similar profile in order to collect the most information-valuable feedback. Also, as mentioned before, after all new interview notes and impressions on the questions and the sessions were taken in order to continuously improve the experience while keeping a unified structure. The first version of the complete guide used to structure the interviews can be found in Appendix 1.

Data Analysis

This exploratory study aims to understand the way communication practitioners make sense of their role in the companies they work for. The thematic analysis of the data is done through an abductive approach, where the findings are compared with each other and with their interaction with the theory (Reichertz, 2013). According to Ozuem et al. (2021), this type of analysis focuses on identifying and describing the ideas found in the empirical material, while stating that the actual themes are not discovered within the data but constructed through the research process. Ozuem et al. (2021) emphasises the importance of acknowledging the role and influence of the researcher in the construction of not only the themes in the analysis but also the questions and ideas that come with it.

Ozuem et al. (2021) state that thematic analysis involves projection where researchers doubtlessly have their own theoretical and experiential preconceptions, drawing back to the need of constantly questioning the data and its iteration with both the theory and the researcher's interpretations. Through this ongoing interaction, the final themes that became the core of the findings of this thesis were defined.

Merriam and Tisdell (2017) mention how this process must be done simultaneously with the data collection and not after. For this reason, the analysis started right after the end of the first interview, taking initial notes, insights, and reflections that came from first impressions and immediate scanning of the recording of the interview. These post-interview sessions allowed to monitor the progress and performance of data collection as well as starting the data analysis at a brainstorming stage.

Braun and Clarke (2006) provide a six-step guide for thematic analysis that was used as the main approach to structure the analysis. The steps include:

(1) Getting familiarised with the data: this step was applied through two to three complete screenings of the video recordings, followed by a detailed curation of each of the transcripts.

(2) Generating initial codes: after reviewing the material several times and going back and forth with the literature, with the help of the interview guide questions, the first initial codes were created. The initial eleven codes were based on the main topics of each of the questions in the interview guide. Each transcript was revisited, reorganised and summarised into the main contents of each of these codes.

(3) Searching for themes: recurring ideas and concepts in the initial codes related to the research questions of the study were later grouped into recurring themes. The relevant contextual information from all participants was summarised in a matrix that can be found in the section on sample selection.

The need to collect and summarise this contextual information is closely connected to the identity construction aspect of sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). It is based on the idea that each individual is composed and constructed by several identities that come into play and influence the way individuals make sense of different phenomena. For the purpose of this study, it is relevant to take into consideration that the educational and

professional background of participants also influences their perceived challenges and insights.

(4-5) Reviewing and naming themes: the selected themes were revisited in relation to the literature review and what were considered the most relevant quotes to back the findings in each case. The names of the final themes, even though they might not be perfect, aim to reflect the main idea of aspects discussed in each section.

(6) Producing the report: To provide a clear structure for the reader to follow, two main themes were created (The big picture and A role with many hats), which are both closely connected to the content of the main research questions of this study. Each of these themes is divided into three and two sub themes respectively, that detail specific aspects of the findings that prevailed the most among participants and that, according to the researcher, drew an especially strong connection to the reviewed literature. Details of their content can be found in the following section.

Trustworthiness, research rigour and reflexivity statement

The trustworthiness of this study has been curated through emerging criteria that puts attention to both rigor and research ethics. Lincoln (2010) explains how researchers working with interpretivist inquiry, need to consider a systematic, detailed, and conscious approach to its method. This consideration has been applied to this study through thorough descriptions and reflections along the entire methodology chapter that allows the reader to have an exhaustive image of how the research was conducted and how to attempt to replicate a similar study.

For this thesis, enabling trustworthiness also means recognizing the value of the participation and relationship of both interviewees and researcher in the social construction of the findings of the study. Furthermore, it recognises the participants' background, relevant biases and personal constructs that come into play in the process of sensemaking involved during the data collection stage, the analysis and development of the findings (Lincoln, 2010). In practical terms these requirements were met through a detailed description of the relevant aspects of the participants background or biases that can be found accompanying each of the quotes in the analysis section. In the case of the re-

search, this acknowledgement of biases can be found in the following reflexivity statement:

Coming from a place like Costa Rica, that holds the only green country brand in the world; with the preservation of biodiversity, social progress, innovation, and sustainable development at its very core (essential COSTA RICA, 2021). There is no wonder that the topic of sustainability has always been close to me. From an academic perspective, my bachelor's in mass communications with a strong focus on a critical tradition gave me the tools to become especially analytical in my field; always placing human relations and the collective dimension of knowledge sensemaking at the forefront of every debate.

In addition, as a professional communicator, in 2019 I had the opportunity to be a part of the team that produced and hosted the meeting prior to the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (PreCOP25) in San Jose, Costa Rica. The event welcomed delegates and representatives from civil society, academia, private sector, finance and subnational governments that shared and discussed possible solutions to promote the acceleration of climate and sustainable development action in different territories (Presidencia de la República de Costa Rica, 2019). The event, primarily focused on public discussions of specific climate actions, helped me understand from an empirically professional perspective, the strategic dimension that permeates the need to communicate about all sorts of sustainability-conscious actions in all levels of society throughout the world.

These personal experiences, added to my formal studies in strategic communication in a country like Sweden, known for its leading trajectory in sustainability helped me to draw a clear line of an existing gap in practice that could be narrowed with the support of the academia.

The previous reflexivity statement, besides serving as an exercise of transparency for the researcher to present her background and existing biases; explains the motivation that originated the idea for this thesis. In the following chapter, the reader can find the main results that emerged from the joined discussion between practitioners and author of the research questions of this study.

Analysis and Discussion

As stated earlier in the theoretical framework chapter, this study is built on a systemic-constructivist perspective. This lens provides theoretical tools to understand the social, and often fluid dimensions of the main constructs that communication practitioners deal with on a daily basis to make sense of their reality within the sustainability sector.

The main theory used to guide this analysis is Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory which includes key concepts like (1) the multiple dimensions that comprise the identity of each individual that make it impossible to arrive at a unique understanding of a phenomenon; (2) the need for a retrospective view enabled by the recollection of specific memories, experiences, and examples that help us support most of our arguments; (3) and finally, the social nature of sensemaking, that was accessed through questions involving the social dynamic and interaction between colleagues and teammates, along with their own perception of the specific context that surrounds their experience.

The first research question: *How do communication practitioners working in sustainability perceive the context of the specific sector their company works in?* is based on the idea that to be able to understand a role and determine its strategic nature, it is of the utmost importance to have a clear image of the context in which it is embedded. The systems perspective and the previously mentioned environment-sensitivity of the sensemaking process come into play to emphasise the tight interdependence of the different components of a system, and how small variations often lead to the unique answers found in this study.

For this research, understanding the context that shaped these findings meant collecting general information like previous experience, educational background, current role, the companies' participants work for main activities, but also what participants perceive as the main challenges, trends, and insights of working in a small sustainability company and of working with sustainability communication. These findings are collected and analysed in the first theme: *The big picture*.

The big picture

The need for understanding the unique political, social, environmental, and economic conditions creating the specific timely relevance of this study, has already been emphasised. This set of conditions include a two-year ongoing global pandemic (Zhenmin, 2020), a new world climate pact (United Nations, 2022), new and increased governmental regulations (European Commission, 2021), a massive surge of new businesses in Sweden with a focus on sustainability (Apsheva & Magnusson, 2022), and with these, a growing market with communication that needs to be strategic at its centre.

Clear trends have started to emerge, both companies and consumers are becoming more specialised in the matter. According to Participant 3, who works as Head of Climate Dialogue for a social media platform focused on discussions around climate impact, these trends have led to an increased demand for more transparent sustainability communication.

“People have very quickly, after COP 26, understood that just talking about targets isn't enough. Companies need to focus on what they're doing here and now, in concrete actions (...) they need to say: this is where we're at right now, this is what we're doing, this is what we're trying to do, this is what we're unable to do, and this is what we need to do” (Participant 3).

Participant 3 explained how a great deal of his tasks are focused on advising partner companies on how best to navigate their communications around climate action. For this reason, he needs to have a very clear idea of what his clients need to prioritise. From a strategic communication perspective, he needs to conduct thorough research to have a comprehensive understanding of what these needs are, which are his clients goals and how do they align with the ones of his company. Generally, among participants, there seems to be a clear conception that sustainability is a complex and pressing issue that requires straightforward solutions.

Participants understand that companies working within the area of sustainability can not offer a fix-all solution and if somebody dares to claim so, it is immediately perceived as greenwashing: *“solving the climate question isn't easy. If it was easy, we wouldn't have the threat of climate change as we do, so I think anyone that makes it sound very easy, is obviously going to be scrutinised” (Participant 1).*

Participant 1 is the newly appointed CMO of a company that works with a digital tool to calculate the carbon footprint of food in restaurant chains, corporate canteens, and hotels. Throughout her interview, she emphasised the importance of finding the correct terms when communicating about their work; on the balance needed between appearing friendly, fun, and accessible, and using the correct scientific terms. Her experience comes from the fact that she regularly needs to respond to criticism in social media about the data her company uses to calculate the carbon footprint of each food ingredient. She explained how these criticisms often turn around in their favour when the data is explained, but for this reason, one of her main tasks was to serve as a final check point of all content produced before it is published.

The same as Participant 1, the invisibility of most of the causes of issues like carbon emissions, and the uncertainty that characterise sustainability communication in general, are being addressed by many of the participants' organisations through detailed science-based targets, real-time traceability, certifications, regulations, and public accountability solutions. (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011)

Both practitioners and businesses are realising that there is doubtlessly *“an inflation in the word of sustainability, it is suddenly used everywhere, in the last two years everything is suddenly sustainable (...) Everything about sustainability becomes a comparison between one thing and another”* (Participant 10). Participant 10 is the co-founder, CEO and head of marketing of a digital marketplace that she refers to as *“a sustainability impact platform aimed at closing the gap between conscious brands and conscious consumers”*. She claims that in the face of a lack of a lawfully standardised notion of what qualifies as being sustainable, her company has come up with their own screening process for the brands that become a part of the platform. Their screening process, openly shared in their platform, takes into consideration a holistic view of sustainability with a strong emphasis on both ethics and climate impact.

The lack of a lawfully standardised definition of what can be perceived as sustainable, that Participant 10 talks about also relates to what the European Commission is working on with the upcoming regulations. Regardless of this, until the entire world economy agrees on one standard, the issue will continue to be a matter of uneven comparisons.

New ways of measuring and assessing the different impacts will continue to make it extra hard for consumers to draw linear comparisons between the solutions available.

The trend that Participant 10 mentions where suddenly everything is sustainable, is leading to a scenario that needs to be tied to a picture increasing in size and complexity, where those involved with sustainability communication do not want to be associated with the word sustainability.

A fuzzy concept

Broman and Robert's (2017) Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) was introduced as a 25-year-long endeavour to develop a tangible and comprehensive tool with detailed principles of what can be perceived as sustainable development and how companies can work with it. The FSSD includes a clear set of criteria, values and steps that professionals can make use of to support their sustainability efforts. Despite its relevance, most participants do not seem to make use of it or even know of its existence.

For many participants, the fact that the concept of sustainability is becoming increasingly mainstream, only seems to be working against it: *"We don't want to use the word sustainability. It's like it doesn't mean anything, I think sustainability it's a very idealistic term. When you say something is sustainable, it just feels like a really vague claim"* (Participant 9). Participant 9 works for a digital platform that specialises on traceability and supply chain transparency for fashion brands, her educational background is not connected to communication, and her previous work experience is not connected to sustainability.

For this reason, her experience with sustainability communication comes from her experience as a consumer and her current job position, where she pointed out again to the issues that come with associating your brand to a concept that, according to her, doesn't really mean anything. In addition, the brand of the company she works for, places a strong focus on the trustworthiness of the data they provide, making it especially relevant for them to have a strong argument to back all their communication.

For communication, brand, and marketing managers in small sustainability companies there seems to be nothing worse than working with a concept with no clear meaning,

surrounded by misconceptions, sceptics, and distrust. In a rapidly evolving and growing market, companies need to find a way to stand out from the crowd, while keeping a flawless moral stand. For many participants, especially the younger ones without an educational background in communication, this is identified as one of the hardest challenges:

“It is hard to always stay on track, to make sure that we are as up-to-date with current research and regulation as can be, the topic evolves every day, so it's really tricky to find a balance (...) there's a lot of misconception. It's also very trendy, everyone wants to do it. But there are no real guidelines. It's very easy to be portrayed for greenwashing” (Participant 1).

Participant 1, with a background in engineering and entrepreneurship, draws attention to a first key finding of this study: practitioners working with sustainability communication need to have an updated training in both strategic communication and the concept of sustainability. Participant 1 highlighted throughout her interview the overwhelming challenge of finding the right way to navigate the unstable environment around the field of sustainability. She elaborated on the constant struggle it meant to stay up to date, to plan ahead and to identify the correct terms to include in her communication.

An education in strategic communication could easily give her the theoretical and practical tools to navigate these challenges. The FSSD (Broman & Robert, 2017) and other strategic tools to manage corporate communication and creating business value like customer relationship management, benchmarking, strategic planning, mission and vision statement, and customer segmentation, among others (Rigby & Bilodeau, 2015 in Volk, et. al, 2017) are just a few examples of resources that can have the potential to benefit both practitioners and the organisations they work for.

This is still business

Another issue that many of the participants battle with is an ethical dilemma. They understand that despite an increase in its popularity, due to the abstract, complex, and long-term nature of working with sustainability, many companies are often reluctant to invest in it. They all seemed to have a very clear motivation for working in the field, the

importance of being passionate about the topic, and the pride and motivation that come from the satisfaction of knowing their work is contributing to the construction of a better world. Regardless of this, the debate remains:

“This is what I have internal battles with: I would love to just create these amazing channels, showing our brand awareness and showing that we care about the environment, but in the end when it comes down to it, we need to just sell the product and this is the main goal because how are we going to make a real difference if we don't even sell the product?” (Participant 11).

Participant 11 is the head of marketing and digital communications of a company developing machines to revolutionize the laundry room and make it more sustainable. Despite having a rather large team, the company remains at a very initial stage and the first product they have created (a box to attach to a laundry machine that saves water and filters microplastics) is still on a developing stage. Regardless, she explained how her educational background in visual communication and change, gave her a strong academic background in sustainability theory, a topic that she has always been passionate about. This emotional connection, added to a strong and clearly defined vision of the company keeps her motivated to create visually attractive and inspiring content for different channels for the company's audiences to live a more sustainable life. Her ethical dilemma, once more, seems to be due to the lack of theoretical and practical tools to align her communicational goals to the business goals of the organisation. It could be claimed that her educational background in visual communication makes her feel more identified with the role of the technician and not the strategist required to drive the communication efforts the young company needs (Steyn, 1999).

Many participants mention a similar issue, where this bigger universal and emotionally loaded goal of sustainable development conflicts with the need to stay profitable. It can also be related to Strother and Fazal (2011) reference to the role of communicators in the creation of compelling, honest, and trustworthy content that stakeholders can identify with, authentic stories with the power to drive both action and change. Participants constantly pointed to the relevance of this dimension of their role to prevent their communication to come across as greenwashing, and how companies that communicate their profiting intentions too bluntly could easily fall under this umbrella.

The moral high ground that consumers have gained from being increasingly exposed to sustainability content from different channels has come with a price: highly critical and sceptical audiences. In one way or the other the concept of greenwashing was present in all interviews, mostly as a precautionary tale of what can happen when companies get caught telling a story that is not transparent, trustworthy, or authentic enough. Participants see this is a label that is exceptionally hard to get rid of.

“There's a lot of environmental shaming, and I hate that, they asked me once at a podcast, what do you think about these oil companies that want to go for wind power, are they just greenwashing? I said no! I mean, you can take it both ways. They are trying to change. I mean, it's like if you say that I'm an asshole and I try to change, isn't that good thing? I'm allergic to people that always say there's only greenwashing, you have to give people the chance to change” (Participant 6)

Participant 6 is the founder and head of corporate communications of a company that works with a machine that cleans the surface of water from oil and sludge. An important use that they have found for these machines is inside water treatment plants and oil refineries. Participant 6 explained, how the work of their machines prevents the release of pollutants into the atmosphere when the water evaporates and allows for the separated oil and sludge from the water to be reused for different purposes. These companies like oil refineries have already been condemned by the public opinion for playing a big role in the deterioration of the environment. For Participant 6 modern society is still highly dependent on oil. She thinks for companies like hers, is not worth it to refuse collaborating with big oil companies, for example, when she knows it could make their operations less harmful for the environment, just on the basis of not wanting to be associated with their bad reputation.

This is what she calls “*environmental shaming*”. When other organisations or individuals working in sustainability refuse to collaborate with companies or even governments that have been condemned by the public, afraid of associating their good brand with the wrong partner. This fear of being perceived as sell-outs and accused of greenwashing is something many participants struggle with. With this concept, Participant 6 introduced a new dimension to the existing ethical debate. Sustainable development is doubtlessly becoming a strong trend that no company wants to be left out of, regardless of whether the motivation comes from the possibility to increase profitability or the possibility to

make the world a little better. For many participants, especially the youngest ones who express a stronger sense of passion for the topic, motivation, transparency, and trustworthiness matter a lot.

Another issue that participants highlighted was their companies' need for exposure. Working as communication practitioners for young and small companies, one of their main goals is to create attractive content that makes people notice, appreciate and engage with the solutions they are offering in order to promote a positive change that also drives profit that makes the company grow. Visibility and exposure in a market that within a couple of years has already become overcrowded, is mentioned as one of the most common challenges that these small companies face: *“Over competition is a big problem, once something becomes popular, then everybody wants to compete in that space, it's very expensive to communicate products if you're not alone”* (Participant 5).

Participant 5 is an experienced communication consultant and angel investor acting as a temporary chief marketing officer for one of the companies he and his partner recently invested in. The company produces vegetarian dairy and meat substitutes that according to him, are excellent in taste. The main reason for his involvement as a temporary CMO is what he calls a pressing need to improve the company's communication strategy. He refers to the already multi billion-dollar market that is the plant-based drink industry. The exponential popularity of this niche market has attracted multinationals like Nestle that according to him, have *“virtually endless amounts of resources”* that make it exceptionally hard for small start-ups like his to compete with (Evans & Terazono, 2021). With such conditions, he stressed the need to make strategically use of the existing resources to thrive. For him, this meant taking the time to plan, prioritize and align efforts and processes with both the communication and founding team.

Find your north star

As briefly mentioned before, the second level of the FSSD focuses on helping companies come up with their own unique definition of success within sustainable development. Even though Broman and Robert's (2017) framework is initially presented as a tool for existing companies to find a way to define and act upon new sustainability goals, for young and small companies founded within the field of sustainability, the

FSSD can serve as a guide to polish a very needed business and communication strategy.

Broman and Robèrt (2017) understand that there is no fit-all formula, but that this framework can provide the guidelines needed to develop a tangible strategic plan, with specific actions to work with, and tools to analyse, measure and reassess the sustainability progress of the company. Participants placed a strong focus on the importance of having clear goals, or at least an overarching vision that everyone in the company can agree upon and feel inspired by. A vision that leaves room for creativity and adaptability to take charge, while sustainability permeates all the activities of the organisation to come across as trustworthy in a market that continues to change and evolve on a daily basis.

Many participants point at this rapid and constant change as an overwhelming challenge. They see the constantly changing environment as limiting to plan far ahead and have a clear roadmap. Others even mention this as the cause of their slow and winding growth, as well as being limited by scarce resources, both human and financial. This finding serves as another indication of the need for these practitioners to adopt a strategic approach to their role as mentioned by Steyn (1999). It points to the need for them to make use of tools that allow them to thoroughly scan their environment to predict changing conditions and proactively plan accordingly.

It might be relevant to highlight that out of the twelve participants of this study, six pointed to the time needed to “*zoom out*” and “*plan ahead*” as regular tasks of their roles and not as challenges: “*clear target setting and follow up to make sure soft things like communication, become hard and tangible for you to easily tell whether it's been done or not*” (Participant 5). As mentioned before, Participant 5 is a communication and marketing consultant and angel investor with more than fifteen years of experience in the field, acting as a temporary CMO for one of his most recent investment companies. His temporary role as an advisor for this young company also gave him a clear perspective on the strategic aspects of communication that, according to him, need to be prioritized.

Of the mentioned six participants, five had more than ten years experience in the field. The sixth one, Participant 3, with less than 4 years of work experience, was the only one

who had formal education in strategic communication. It is clear that a strategic approach to communication can be achieved through both experience and education, and that it is a key approach to solve the main challenges of working with sustainability communication.

A role with many hats

Once the findings have outlined a clearer understanding of the participants' perception of the context they are working with, the second research question of this study *How do communication practitioners working in sustainability make sense of their role in their company?* opens room for the analysis to continue to determine the strategic nature of sustainability communication from the perspective of active practitioners.

Fieseler et al. (2015) claim that the role of communication practitioners is evolving with a tendency towards more nuanced differences, is applicable to the findings of this study. Participants describe their roles as incredibly varied and almost unpredictable, with no two days that look the same. These ideas are aligned with Cheney et. al's (2011) description of post-bureaucratic organisations that are characterised for having a deep focus on projects, and strong level of adaptability expected of practitioners with higher educational levels. These are characteristics that, according to participants, are also aligned with the requirements of working at any start-up company.

Beyond the previously mentioned characteristics, participants were asked to mention and elaborate on what they considered the top skills needed to perform in a position like the one they were working at, as the main person accountable for the communication of the company.

“Empathy and courage to make decisions, to stand by those decisions and take responsibility for them. To communicate clearly with your team, on what they should be doing, how they should prioritise tasks, and what's expected” (Participant 5).

As mentioned before, Participant 5 was the one with the most experience in communication management, so for him the answer was very clear and straightforward. All the other participants shared similar ideas like the importance of empathy, to put yourself in the shoes of coworkers, clients, and other stakeholders, to understand their needs and

manage their expectations. On top of this consensus, Participant 5 added the unique dimension of “*courage to make decisions, to stand by those decisions and take responsibility for them*”. This aspect can be drawn back to his long trajectory in the field, of knowing that regardless of how much you prepare, things may not go as planned and as a communication manager you need to have the maturity to be held accountable for your decisions and act upon them.

Other aspects that Participant 5 referred to, and most of the participants agreed on that this role needs to take into consideration, was the importance of tasks like planning, coordinating and prioritising. Other participants added the need to stay curious, conduct research, to ask a lot of questions, to be patient, transparent, overly communicative, to seek and provide feedback, learn from mistakes, to be passionate about work and constantly look for inspiration. All these values point to the fundamentals of strategic communication that include research, environmental scanning, planning, goal and objective setting, and constant evaluation.

Filters of meaning

Another key aspect that stood out for all participants and that can be commonly found in the literature was their role as filters of meaning (Allen, 2016; Godemann & Michelsen, 2011). Many similar concepts were used to describe this dimension of the role: the spider in the web, the bridge, the ones that collect information, decipher it, and redirect meaning, by adjusting it to the needs of each stakeholder and connecting them through the right communication channel.

“I meet with salespeople to understand the prospects or the customer's point of view. That's very important for me just to understand what they think and feel and what's important for them. A lot of my work is gathering all this information and interpreting it, doing research, subscribing to some industry outlets, and trying to always stay up to date. I am constantly talking with the rest of the team to basically polish the narrative.” (Participant 9)

Participant 9 works for a company with a digital fashion supply chain traceability platform. She explained how the complexity of the product, the amount of stakeholders involved and the deep technology focus of the platform requires her to work a lot on

gathering and processing information from different sources, to make sense of it when including it in her communication work. She mentioned that from her perspective “*content is king*” and it is one of the main means that companies like the one she works for, need to use to reach and connect with wider audiences. She detailed not only the meaning making dimension of her role, but also relevant tasks like competitor analysis and environmental scanning that come into play when developing communication strategies.

Godemann and Michelsen (2011) elaborate on the idea that Participant 9 mentions by stressing the need for communication practitioners to be able to lead and navigate the complex strategic process of creating mutual understanding and interaction between all relevant stakeholders, both internal and external. Falkheimer and Heide (2018) emphasise on this aspect of the role of communication as a crucial facilitator of meaning that enables further action in society. From a company perspective participants also understand that “*Communication doesn't solve the fundamental challenges of a company, it's only a catalyst*” (Participant 5).

Participant 5, also from his experience as both a communication consultant and entrepreneur, highlighted a key differentiator of the role of communication as an enabler that facilitates further action. He pointed out that practitioners, companies, and consumers need to remember that actual change, especially when it comes to sustainable development, comes in the form of actions enabled through communication, not as communication. For this reason, understanding communication as a symbolically mediated action can be seen as a key step to set the stage for individuals to build upon their perception of reality, and take further action (Godemann & Michelsen, 2016).

The strategic nature of sustainability communication

The final theme that stood out for most participants was what they called strategic work. Even though in practice, this dimension of the role meant different things, participants often referred to a sense of progress or status check with their teams, along with the need and action to plan ahead.

“Being strategic starts with being good at evaluating your processes. I think that many communicators are not seeing what they're actually doing and how all the small things that you do in communication are working together (...) it is about

the capability to zoom out and say okay, what do we need? To test it, evaluate it, and see whether it's a success or failure. It's about understanding the bigger vision of your company and narrowing it down to a communication strategy" (Participant 3).

As mentioned before, Participant 3 is one of the youngest participants, with the least amount of work experience. Her detailed description of what doing strategic work means for her in her role as CMO, also seems to relate to the fact that out of all participants, she is the only one with formal education in strategic communication. Her quote directly refers to the concerns of Falkheimer and Heide (2018) about an existing confusion in both practice and academia on what the term strategic communication really is about. They elaborate on the common misconception of understanding strategic communication as merely planned communication.

This idea is exactly what Participant 3 is referring to. She elaborated on the fact that many communication practitioners tend to focus on operational things without paying attention to how their actions relate to the bigger picture of the organization. She referred to the way many communicators often spend a lot of hours creating very nice posts for social media without paying attention to the reason behind it.

On the other hand, for many other participants, strategic work meant something less inclusive. Many of them mentioned tasks like weekly digital meetings, planning the social media content for next week, updating collaborative documents, having unplanned discussions, and even feedback sessions with team members. For most, it rarely meant a written down document with a spelled-out strategy because of how easy it would become outdated.

In relation to the above, Falkheimer and Heide (2018) continue to detail how planned communication is connected to more localised tactical goals and not necessarily to the overall long-term goals of the organisation. They explain that strategic communication differentiates from other types of communication, by building an understanding of the key role of communication in the continuation, validity, and overall operations of a company. This higher understanding of the role of communication that Falkheimer and Heide (2018) mention was lost on the practical experience for most of the youngest participants. An example of this was Participant 1, who as mentioned before, with an edu-

cational background in engineering, felt continuously caught up on day-to-day tasks that according to her, made it impossible to draw a clear roadmap of where the company's communications were heading.

On the other hand, for Participant 3, her formal training in strategic communication seemed to have given her the tools to elaborate the most on what being strategic meant for her in clear practical terms. She detailed on previously mentioned aspects like the need to continuously focus on environmental scanning, planning and evaluation while working on her communication strategies and tasks. In addition, older participants stressed the need to have experience to perform and own the role of the person accountable for the communication of an organisation and carry out the needed strategic dimension of the role:

“You need experience to know how things work, what kind of messages resonate with people, what are the pitfalls? What are the things that can go wrong? Are you prepared to spot the weak spots in a plan? What's most likely to go wrong?”
(Participant 5).

Participant 5, from his many years working in the field of communication, brought up points that he considered were key practical skills that a communication manager should have, aspects that according to him can only be reached through experience. This experience-centric perspective as the ideal path to perform the role in a successful way can be related to the relatively recent nature of the fields of both strategic and sustainability communication.

When contrasted with the experience of Participant 3 for example, as the youngest and most inexperienced participant but the only one with formal training in strategic communication, a difference of more than twenty years of both life and work experience are meant to create a significant distance. From a sensemaking perspective, it is clearly understood that individual and collective experiences are important factors in the construction of how participants perceive the same phenomena.

Regardless, an interesting connection can be made: first, a clear idea of what strategic communication entails can be found in both education and experience. Secondly, a strong theoretical base as the starting point of a career path can highly boost the quality

and depth of the knowledge acquired through work experience in both the fields of sustainability and strategic communication.

Conclusions

This chapter resumes the main findings and relevant conclusions extracted from this thesis, its contributions to the field of strategic communication and relevant limitations encountered. To finalise this study, suggestions for ideas that might inspire future research are provided. Furthermore, the purpose of these suggestions is to continue to solidify the growing subject of sustainability communication as a matter for strategic communication scholars to dig deeper into, for active practitioners to gain further specialisation, and for future professionals to consider as a very relevant career path going forward.

This study aimed to determine the strategic nature of sustainability communication by exploring the way communication practitioners working for small sustainability companies in Sweden make sense of their role and the professional context in which it is embedded. Regarding the broader field of sustainable development and sustainability, participants pointed out the existence of a strong and rapidly evolving popularity trend. This tendency is catching the attention of big and small companies, investors, and entrepreneurs to become a part of it and associate their brands with the concept of sustainability in one way or another.

Even though in terms of progress towards the SDGs, this momentum can be seen as a positive occurrence, the increased popularity of the topic is also causing a process of overinflation of the concept and the communication around it. Consumers are demanding transparency and accountability from companies claiming to work with sustainability, and for practitioners this has meant moving away from using the word sustainability, towards a more detailed description of the products and services they offer (i.e support with science-based targets).

This unique scenario is building up a set of conditions that communication practitioners need to quickly adapt and respond to enable the young and small companies they work for, to stay competitive. The exponential rise in popularity of the sustainability market after COVID-19 has allowed consumers and other stakeholders to become deeply spe-

cialised, and critical of the sustainability communication efforts they come across. They are aware that most sustainability related issues are not simple and are sceptical of solutions presented as such. Under these stressing conditions, communicators play a key role as mediators and filters of meaning to reach out to the right stakeholders to find the correct terms and use it in the best way to be able to meet these high demands.

Participants also point out the inherent emotional dimension of working with sustainability communication. A sense of pride and satisfaction that comes from performing a role that is aligned with close personal values that, in addition, is contributing to a positive change in the world. They elaborate on the fact that the role they perform needs to be carried out with a deep sense of passion, team collaboration and empathy to contribute to the production of authentic, transparent and trustworthy communication that will ward off the label of greenwashing.

Findings show that this emotional dimension comes with a complex moral and ethical stand that practitioners need to learn to navigate. The concept of authentic communication in sustainability, on many occasions seems to be in conflict with profit driven communication and other marketing efforts. Despite the urge for transparency, some participants are weary to connect their sustainability communication efforts with the company's need to produce economic profit because they feel it makes their work somehow less authentic.

All these conditions seem to add up to a communication practitioner role with a large and increasing level of complexity that requires an advanced strategic approach to be carried out successfully. Above all, participants place the setting of clear overarching goals and vision at a macro level to be one of their top priorities and challenges. In this continuously changing and growing market, communication practitioners are therefore required to grasp the magnitude of the previously mentioned *big picture* which means grounding their strategies and tactics on constant research, evaluation and reassessment. They need to become mediators of meanings, to carefully filter all the voices that need to be taken into consideration and direct the conversation through the proper channels while staying transparent and authentic. Results also show that an education in strategic communication can provide young and inexperienced practitioners with the theoretical and practical tools needed to navigate these challenges.

Contributions to research and practice

As mentioned at the beginning of this study, working towards sustainable development is a pressing issue that concerns all humans, and it has communication at its centre. The results discussed in this thesis point once more to the need for purposeful and strategy-driven sustainability communication that several authors have already mentioned (Allen, 2016; Godemann & Michelsen, 2011; Signitzer & Prexl, 2007; Tölkes, 2020). These findings point to a gap that should be further addressed by strategic communication scholars and practitioners.

Thomas and Stephens (2015) present strategic communication as the meeting point between management strategy and communication, an already multidisciplinary field that gains new depth when sustainability is added to the picture. In a context of modern and post-bureaucratic organisations, where company roles become more fluid and horizontal, professionals working in this field need to adapt and evolve (Cheney et al., 2011).

In the findings of this study, the required evolution points to a missing strategic approach to sustainability communication that needs to be further specialized. For companies working within the field of sustainability, the sense of strategic alignment with bigger global goals like the SDGs is perceived to be vital in order to remain competitive in an already overpopulated market that demands transparency and trustworthiness. In connection to this, Zerfass et al. (2018) definition of strategic communication as purposeful communication efforts aimed at attaining the main goals of an organisation, continues to be one of the most relevant in the field. When sustainability communication is added to the equation this means that from a strategic perspective, communication practitioners need to align their communication efforts with both their company's business goals as well as the global SDGs.

Current research shows that despite the recent boost in popularity of both sustainability communication and strategic communication, the clear global focus on sustainable development is here to stay. For this reason, exploring deeper into the strategic nature of sustainability communication, can open a path into a needed and exponential growth for both fields.

Limitations

As an exploratory qualitative study, this research did not take into consideration several aspects that could have influenced the participants' answers in several ways. When working in small and young companies, many of the participants often perform several roles simultaneously, which limited their availability very much. Therefore, several relevant aspects like age, gender, nationality, educational background, previous work experiences, and even the context of Sweden providing a unique geographical, cultural and political context, embedded in the greater European dimension were just briefly mentioned during interviews.

An approach that could have improved the results within the existing conditions of this study could have been to book follow-up interviews with the participants. Since longer time slots were not available, follow-up interviews could have influenced a deeper sense of rapport between participants and researcher. Furthermore, a stronger focus on the systemic-constructivist perspective could have also suggested the need to apply other data collection methods like focus group interviews and observations to gain a deeper understanding of the social dimension of the phenomena at hand. These adjustments to the study are thought to have enhanced the depth and quality of the findings.

Future research

The previously mentioned limitations also serve as inspiration for future research. When it comes to aspects like the gender dimension found in the role, among the twelve participants, only two were males. In addition, a clear female majority emerged in most potential participants as well. This disparity raises the question about the potential relevance of a gender dimension in the way communication practitioners, working in sustainability make sense of their roles. An example of this is the study done by Franz-Balsen (2014) that claims that the gender dimension of sustainability communication has been neglected in both research and practice. In her findings, she explains how gender competence is a key skill for communication practitioners to have when working with sustainability communication since gender norms greatly influence worldviews, behaviour, and even shape organizational structures. In addition, Franz-Balsen (2014) suggests the importance of adding the cultural dimension that often sits on top of gender norms that influence the way people make sense of sustainable communication.

Likewise, this study adheres to Franz-Balsen's (2014) suggestion to take into consideration the part that the cultural background plays when practitioners make sense of their roles. Furthermore, future research should combine the strategic nature of sustainability communication with other personal dimensions of practitioners like gender and culture. To conclude, an additional aspect that was not taken into consideration in this study, but emerged from the empirical material, is the generational dimension. With the results of this study, a deeper look into the way the generational differences can influence this complex sensemaking process, can also provide a more nuanced understanding of the strategic nature of the sustainability communication field.

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Appendixes

Data collection instrument: Semi-structured interview guide

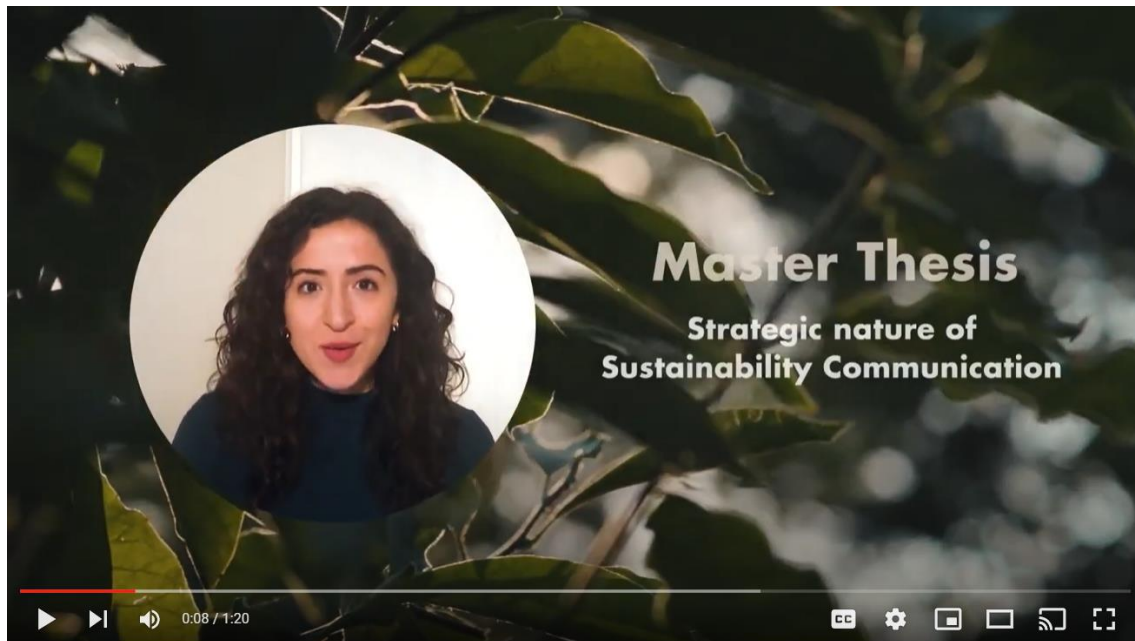
RQ1: How do communication practitioners working in sustainability perceive the context of the specific sector their company works in?

RQ2: How do communication practitioners working in sustainability, make sense of their role inside their company?

Semi-structured interview guide		
	<i>About the company</i>	
1.	Tell me about the company you work for: What is it about? Who are your main stakeholders?	RQ1
2.	Through an example, can you tell me what do you think makes this company stand out?	RQ1
3.	From your experience so far, what do you think are the main challenges for the company nowadays?	RQ1
4.	Can you detect or predict any specific communication trends in the field (of sustainability) from your experience so far? If yes, which ones?	RQ1
	<i>About the company's communication</i>	
5.	What do you think are the main challenges of working with a company in sustainability as a communication professional? Why?	RQ2
6.	What are the main communication goals of the company now? How were these goals set?	RQ2
7.	What are the main communication strategies in place to achieve these goals? Can you give me examples of how these strategies are implemented?	RQ2

	<i>About the communication practitioner role</i>	
8.	Tell me a little bit about your role: How does a regular workday look like for you? What are the main tasks and responsibilities of your role?	RQ2
9.	What does your work dynamic look like? Who do you usually work with? What do you think of this dynamic?	RQ2
10.	Can you explain with examples what you think are the main skills needed when working with sustainability communication?	RQ2
11.	Do you feel your professional profile has changed or evolved since you first started working in sustainability? If yes, how and why?	RQ2

Video Invitation



Link to full video: <https://youtu.be/UZ2-DNAAyf4>

Informed consent form

Making the world a better place: The role of communication practitioners in sustainability organisations

This consent form is part of the process required for the ethical treatment of participants in research. It should give you a basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about the research process or procedures, please ask.

Study purpose

This research is conducted by Aurora Rodriguez Badilla as her final thesis project for the master in Strategic Communication programme at Lund University. The study aims to determine the nature of sustainability communication as a strategic communication function by gaining an understanding of the way communication practitioners working in young organisations whose core business is sustainability, make sense of their role and the main challenges around them.

Research Method

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be invited to have a 30-minute semi-structured conversation with the researcher through an online meeting. During the interview, you will be asked, for example, about the main challenges that you experience in your work as a professional communicator and the key trends and insights you identify within the field of sustainability communication. Your answers, together with those of the other research participants will be transcribed and reported to draw the main findings of this study.

Benefit

By participating, you will contribute to a better understanding of the role communication practitioners play in small organisations working with sustainability and determine the strategic nature of this role. The findings of this study will be shared with you to use as

an academy-back claim to strengthen your professional profile and your position within your organisation.

Confidentiality - Anonymity - Security

If you decide to participate, your identity as a participant in this study, and any other personal information gathered about you during the study, will be kept strictly confidential and will never be made public. All data containing personal information from which you could be identified will be deleted after the data analysis. Electronic data will be password protected. When the study is completed, all data containing personal information will be destroyed. The published results of the study will contain only data from which no individual participant can be identified.

Voluntary participation

You are being asked to make a voluntary decision whether or not to participate in this study. If there is any part of the information that is not clear, please feel free to ask for clarifications. If you would like to consult with someone not associated with this study that will be alright, too. If you decide not to participate, or if you later decide to discontinue your participation, your decision will not affect your present or future relations with the researchers or Lund University. Upon request, a copy of the information, data, and results will be made available to you. You will always be free to discontinue participation at any time, and all data collected up to that time as a result of your partial participation will be destroyed without being used in the study. If you decide to participate, please provide your signature as indicated below.

What Your Signature Means

Your signature on this Consent Form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research project and agree to participate as a participant. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequences. Your continued participation should be informed as your initial

consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Signature of Participant

Date

Print Name

Note: Signed consent forms were excluded from this document to protect the confidentiality of the participants