Explore the Role of Insights and Insight-Driven Communication Within Strategy Processes: A Study of Swedish Communication Agencies

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Abstract

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In recent years, Swedish communication agencies have increasingly emphasized the value of insight-driven communication for strategic processes. Advocates argue that this methodology enhances creative potential, more accurate target audiences, and improves various organizational functions. Despite some attention in strategic communication research on topics such as data-driven approaches and the strategic role of consultants, the specific phrasing of insight-driven communication has remained underexplored. Insight-driven communication explicitly focuses on the role of insights as the foundational element in strategy formulation and execution, unlike broader terminologies that see insights as part of various processes. This study aims to address this interest by investigating the role of insights from an agency perspective within the context of insight-driven communication for strategic work processes. Grounded in a social constructivist approach, this study draws on Sensemaking and Strategy-as-Practice theories. Sensemaking theory explains how communication consultants interpret and give meaning to raw data, transforming it into actionable insights. Meanwhile, Strategy-as-Practice theory offers a lens through which to view the activities, processes and practices that constitutes strategic work within communication agencies. The empirical material consists of nine semi-structured interviews with communication consultants from various agencies, providing a source of qualitative data, capturing the diverse perspectives and experiences. The findings indicates that insights are important for developing targeted and effective communication strategies. Consultants emphasized that insights offers a deep understanding of consumer behaviors and motivations enabling companies to tailor their strategies more effectively. This tailored approach enhances the relevance and impact of communication efforts, driving better client outcomes. Insights do also serve as a crucial foundation for creative ideation and innovation, guiding the development of compelling narratives and campaigns. The study underscores the critical role of insights in guiding strategic communication decisions and highlights the importance of adopting an insight-driven approach in today's competitive landscape.

Keywords: Insights, Insight-Driven Communication, Communication Consultants, Strategy-as-Practice, Sensemaking

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1. Introduction

The communication landscape has undergone significant changes due to technological advances, digitization and increased consumer expectations. These changes have extended the need for companies to differentiate themselves in the business market and to select strategies with greater precision. In the digital era, the possibilities of data collection have revolutionized the way companies engage with their target audiences, particularly through social media. Consequently, companies must create more compelling messages that can break through the media noise and reach target audiences more effectively (Ragazou et al., 2023).

With the increased availability of information and effective channels for information dissemination via social media, companies must enhance their communication strategies. This necessity has led many organizations to increasingly rely on communication agencies for various communicative solutions. The ability to collect, analyze and utilize data about consumers, target groups, social trends and competitors has become a major strategic asset and competitive advantage (Smith, 2017).

Different companies employ various approaches and strategies to utilize data and insights within their operations. The decision to collaborate with communications agencies is often based on consultants' expertise in industry landscape, client needs, target groups and communicative messages derived from extensive data collections (Smith, 2017). But in order for data to be effectively transformed into strategic decisions, it must be processed and analyzed, a practice commonly referred to as Business Intelligence (Ragazou et al., 2023).

In today's competitive markets, the ability to manage and process content is crucial to achieving competitive advantages and reaching target groups. The analysis phase of information has thus evolved into a critical moment, as the outcomes of communication efforts largely depends on the insights produced during the information process. This analysis phase is named "insight work" in practice among communication agencies, as the insights produced during this phase, accordingly to the consultants, form the foundation for successful communication strategies and activities. Communication agencies market their insight work through the concept of "insight-driven communication", which has developed into a methodology for maximizing communication effectiveness within the agency industry.

An insight, in this research paper, is defined as a deep understanding of something or new knowledge about a phenomenon. Communication agencies that practice insight-driven communication view an insight as the result of an in-depth analysis and interpretation of col-

lected data. These insights enable the identification and understanding of aspects that are important to people, their behaviors, needs and desires (Lindh, 2019; Roxx, 2023).

Insight-driven communication, according to communication agencies, acts as a compass for the creative processes involved in developing various communication activities and strategies. The concept of co-creation (Sarasvuo et al., 2022), wherein companies and clients collaborate to create value, is intertwined with the insight process. This collaboration between data and insight is highly important, as insights guide strategic choices and decisions and thereby enhancing the accuracy and success of communicative efforts by tailoring content to the interests and needs of target groups.

Historically, the concept of insights has been studied within psychology research, where it is seen as sudden understandings of something or as part of solution-oriented approaches (Wertheimer, 1945; Stuyck et al., 2021; Klein & Jarosz, 2011). The researchers Osuna-Mascaró and Auersperg (2021) further argue that the concept of insight should be seen as a "source for creative production" (Osuna-Mascaró & Auersperg, 2021, p.2) while being aware that the concept has been attributed to different definitions depending on cultural differences. Additionally, Kounios and Beeman (2014) propose that the creation of insights can be described as a dynamic process of mental elements, involving the interaction between thoughts, information and revelations. Hence, insights should be seen as a dynamic phenomenon (Kounios & Beeman, 2014), with a significant role in strategic work.

Strategy work, strategy planning and insight work are central components of the agency industry for decision-making and strategy formulation. Insights acts as a basis for strategic thinking and planning, which later are translated into communication activities. Within strategic communication research, the understanding of strategy has evolved, drawing substantial inspiration from the management perspective to obtain a deeper understanding of strategy as a concept (Andersson, 2020). It can further be seen that insights and strategic planning form the first phase of strategy work, guiding the direction and approach of communication efforts. The researchers Johnson et al. (2015) further believe that a company's purpose should be rooted in how it creates value and for whom, which underlines the importance of insight work.

Examining the insight process and insight-driven communication as an alternative method is interesting as it demonstrates how insights can be integrated within strategy processes. While academic research explores various approaches to strategy and communicative methods, insight work from this perspective has not been extensively addressed. Although the

method of working insight-driven has received attention across various industries, it has often been perceived as a trend, rather than as a sustainable strategic approach.

In previous strategic communication research, studies have examined different communication strategies, the delivery of insights and the outcomes of strategy processes. However, the precise term "insight-driven communication" is absent, leaving its academic definition unclear. Concurrently, communication practitioners and companies have published articles discussing the phenomenon (c.f. Rågsjö Thorell, 2019), advocating for its recognition within strategy processes as a robust approach and emphasizing the importance of insights for effective communication. Therefore, to understand insight-driven communication as a methodological choice within strategic frameworks, a redefinition of the concept is required. This redefinition will delve into the role of insights in strategy processes as a practical and applicable methodology, as well as evaluate its impact on communication performance from an agency perspective.

The approach used within the concept of insight-driven communication can be compared to the approaches within other strategic communication methods, where the integration of insights plays a crucial role. For example, data-driven strategies, audience-centric approaches and other marketing models all emphasize the importance of stemming from actionable insights from various forms of data and research. These approaches are connected with insight-driven communication as they also seeks to understand and leverage insights to inform strategic decisions and communication practices.

The interesting aspect that differentiates the methods lies in the specific formulation of insight-driven communication and its area of use. Unlike broader terminologies that encompass a wide range of data and research-driven approaches, insight-driven communication explicitly focuses on the role of insights as the fundamental part of strategy formulation and execution. Insight-driven communication as a concept elevates insights from merely supporting strategy to being at the core of how strategies are developed and implemented. Examining the importance of the concept highlights the possibility of potentially refining and improving strategic decisions by placing greater emphasis on the consistent and deliberate application of insights.

From a strategy perspective, this approach is consistent with the broader principles of strategic management, which emphasize the importance of informed decision-making (c.f. Buhmann et al., 2018) and the alignment of organizational goals with the real market environment. Although the integration of insights into strategic communication is not entirely new, this conceptualization of insight-driven communication offers a more precise and poten-

tially more effective way of working. This perspective emphasizes the changing nature of strategy work and the constant need for innovation and refinement in strategic communication methods.

1.1. Aim

This research study aims to investigate and understand the concept of insights from an agency perspective and its role within the concept of insight-driven communication. By exploring how insights are generated, integrated and utilized to shape communication strategies, the study aims to contribute new knowledge to strategy research in the communication industry. To fully understand insight-driven communication within strategic frameworks, it is essential to adopt a nuanced perspective that highlights the significance of insights in strategy processes. This redefinition seeks to position insight-driven communication as a practical and applicable methodology. By exploring the role of insights and insight-driven communication as an approach in strategic work, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how communication can be improved as a strategic asset. To answer this research objective, the study contains the following research questions:

1) How do communication consultants convert unprocessed data into valuable insights within client projects?

2) What criteria do communication consultants utilize to identify the most valuable and appropriate insights for crafting communication activities within client projects?

3) What is the significance of insights in guiding the planning and execution of communication activities within the agency industry?

2. Synthesis of Theories and Prior Research

This chapter aims to provide a deeper understanding of strategy in strategic management and strategic communication by combining previous research with the theoretical perspectives of Sensemaking and Strategy-as-Practice (SAP). This combining approach intends to position the study and create contextual frames of reference for strategy in relation to insight-driven communication. The SAP theory, which focuses on the concrete activities and practices within strategy work, complements previous research by offering a micro-perspective on strategy processes. The theory of Sensemaking emphasizes the cognitive and interpretive processes that underlie the creation of insights. Together, these perspectives contribute to a more nuanced basis for how insight creation can be understood and used to shape strategic actions within agency operations.

2.1. Different Approaches to Strategy

The research on strategy development has advanced over time, and the concept of strategy has been attributed to different definitions and methods depending on industries. However, there is a common opinion among researchers that strategy refers to selected guidelines that guide various decisions from start to finish (Andrews, 1971; Steiner, 1969). The diversity of interpretations and areas of use has made it difficult for researchers to clearly define what strategy actually means (Whittington, 2001). This uncertainty has raised questions about whether a concept that can be defined in different ways, like strategy, can still hold its specific meaning. Chaffee (1985) confirms Whittington's (2001) reasoning but believes that the concept of strategy is situational and therefore cannot be attributed to a universal definition that is applicable to all industries. By studying communication agencies and their client projects, they lean more towards project-based strategy that is connected to their creative work processes. Project-based strategy can be seen as a situational process because the strategies and their content are varied depending on the context and the company.

Within strategy research, two main groups can be identified: those researchers who believe that strategies should be planned and structured and those who see strategies as emerging, dynamic and changing. The planned and structured perspective sees strategy as a meth-

odology of planning ahead with the aim of anticipating change. Strategy-creation has traditionally been seen as a well-defined and planned process in which strategies are formulated in advance and then implemented (Newman & Logan, 1971; Andrews, 1971; Steiner, 1969). The second group of researchers sees strategy as a dynamic process that deals with the idea of strategy being seen as a pattern of decisions and that it does not necessarily have to be predetermined but instead develops organically over time through actions and tactics (Mintzberg, 1978).

The project-based strategy that the agency industry primarily relies on needs to be flexible, dynamic and iterative since each client project is unique in terms of needs, target groups, strategic path choices and visions. According to Mintzberg (1978, 1994), the line between strategic planning and implementation is blurred, and strategies are created according to a balance between planning and flexibility, thus adapting to organizational and environmental factors. He further believes that the strategy process is intertwined with the implementation process, which suggests that detailed strategic planning may be unnecessary because many external decisions may arise during the implementation phase. Moreover, it is worth considering which industries the approach is genuinely applicable to. Regarding the agency industry, it is about finding a balance between both perspectives in order to be prepared but flexible against possible changes.

2.1.1. Strategy-as-Practice: A Combined Perspective

Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) offers another influential strategic dimension to the understanding of strategy processes by focusing on concrete activities, processes and practices, at a micro level, that constitute strategy work within organizations (Whittington, 2006). SAP emphasizes that strategy is not just a formal plan implemented by employees, but rather something created and reshaped through practical actions and social interactions at all levels of an organization (Mantere, 2005). This approach challenges the traditional view where strategy is usually seen as a static plan created by management and then implemented by employees (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985).

According to Whittington (2003, 2006; Jarzabkowski, 2005), SAP can be divided into three central components: practitioners, practices and praxis. Practitioners refer to the individuals who are active within strategic processes and who play a decisive role in how strategies are formed and implemented. Practices are the concrete activities and routines that frame the strategy process, while praxis embraces the coherent practice of strategic activities and

how these contribute to shaping strategies. This breakdown provides a deeper understanding of how strategy is created through practical activities rather than through formal plans alone. However, it is interesting to further study how these three groupings interact with each other within organizations and strategic processes.

Whittington (1996, 2003, 2006; Jarzabkowski, 2005) describes how practices within SAP are central to strategic processes and decisions. These individuals can be active at different levels within an organization, which means that strategy is not only created by top management, but also through interactions and decisions at lower levels. This approach is supported by Mintzberg and Waters (1985), who identified the difference between deliberate and emergent strategy. Deliberate strategy is planned and structured, while emergent strategy is developed through reactions and adaptations to changes in the environment. Strategy-as-Practice theory confirms how these two types of strategy do not only coexist, but also interact and influence each other through daily activities and decisions (Jarzabkowski, 2005).

Jarzabkowski (2005) and Spee and Jarzabkowski (2009) emphasize the importance of understanding practices through the conversations and discourses in which strategic practices are constructed and negotiated. The researchers highlight how strategic decisions are shaped through social interaction and communication, which is in line with SAP's focus on how strategy is developed through practical actions. An example of this is how strategic decisions in many organizations are not made in isolation, but rather through a process of continuous dialogue and negotiation between different actors (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016; Vaara, 2010).

Regnér (2003) shows differences in how strategies are developed depending on the part of the organization where they are created. Deductive development, which is based on existing knowledge, structures and traditional strategies, is contradictory to inductive development, which is experimental and focuses on new technologies and markets. The Strategy-as-Practice theory (Whittington, 2003) complements this view by emphasizing how both deductive and inductive methods are part of the continuous practice in which strategies are formed and changed.

In harmony with these perspectives, SAP practitioners focus on identifying and using various strategic tools and methods to navigate through complex organizational environments (Jarzabkowski, 2005). It is through daily practice, such as meetings, workshops and informal discussions, that strategic ideas are developed and implemented. This view of strategy as a practical activity is contradictory towards more traditional models (Andrews, 1971; Steiner, 1969) where strategy is seen as a set of fixed plans implemented from the top down. Instead, Strategy-as-Practice emphasizes the importance of understanding the social and organization-

al contexts in which strategy work takes place, and how these contexts influence and are shaped by strategic actions.

2.2. Strategic Planning and Emergent Praxis

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how strategies are formulated and developed from a management perspective, research has defined the concept of strategic planning (Grünig & Kühn, 2015). Studies have shown that strategic planning is central to strategy development, including how organizations identify and analyze problems, goals and strategy selection (Wolf & Floyd 2017; Harrison & Phillips, 1991). In addition, strategic planning has been identified as a factor for integration and coordination within organizations. However, it is not only about creating a future plan, but also about understanding the current context. By carefully analyzing internal and external factors, organizations can identify different path choices that in turn can inform strategic decisions (Wolf & Floyd, 2017).

Within the strategic management literature, there is a diversity of approaches to analysis and planning that can be used to address various problems and challenges. Many methods are closely interconnected in practice, even if they are attributed with different names, which makes it difficult to get an overview of the process as the choice of method often depends on the specific situation (Grünig & Kühn, 2015). To successfully implement the strategy, organizations must engage in a variety of activities. It is not just about formulating plans, but also about implementing them in a meaningful and effective way. A central part of strategic planning is to identify and evaluate different strategic alternatives. There are no fixed rules dictating which framework or methods are best suited for each organization, but most processes seem to follow the same phases (Grünig & Kühn, 2015; Smith, 2017; Buhmann et al., 2018; Hallahan et al., 2007): understand current assumptions, formulate strategies, implement tactics and then continuously evaluate and adapt them if needed.

Although strategic planning is an essential factor in the various projects of the agency industry, the view of strategic communication methods as social, dynamic and co-creative processes dominates. Falkheimer and Sandberg (2018) as well as Greenberg (2014) believe that communication should be seen as a complex, active and interactive process where strategies are not only seen as a well-defined plan that is created in an organization and then implemented. Rather, strategic work is dependent on ongoing and dynamic processes where planning and implementation are intertwined. Furthermore, Falkheimer and Sandberg (2018) emphasize that although the traditional way has separated planning and implementation apart,

the dynamics of strategic communication means that the boundaries between these phases are increasingly blurred.

This understanding underlines Gidden's (1984) theories of structuration, which emphasize that social systems and practices are intertwined. Structuring theory suggests that people's actions both shape and are shaped by social structures (c.f. Bourdieu, 1984; Shove et al., 2012; Schatzki, 2019), which resonates well with SAP's emphasis on practical activities within strategy work. The practice perspective within SAP highlights how strategies are not only the result of formal planning, but also of continuous interactions and adaptations to changing circumstances (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Winkler and Etter (2018) developed Mintzberg's (1978) view of emergent strategies by seeing them as the result of reflection, new opportunities and organizational learning.

Communication agencies do not only operate from the emergent perspective, they are also influenced by the agile approach. According to Aghina et al. (2018), agile organizations are considered as living organisms that strive to balance stability and flexibility to better adapt to external demands. Organizations are considered to benefit from agile working methods and practices (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2016; Roberts & Grover, 2012), as these enable them to identify and act proactively on important changes.

2.3. Communication as Strategic Practice

Within the field of strategic communication, the concept of strategy has been defined in different ways, similar to how the concept has been adopted within the management perspective (Andersson, 2020). Similar to the management perspective, strategic communication researchers have different views on how strategy should be managed, and the dominant trend has been about communication practitioners' ability to think rationally and be able to plan within communication processes. Grunig (1992) proposes a model where strategic communication is seen as a systematic process with analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation. This can be understood through Strategy-as-Practice as part of the ongoing practice where strategies are shaped through interaction and daily activities (Whittington, 2001).

This systematic process adhering from strategic planning (Grünig & Kühn, 2015; Buhmann et al., 2018; Hallahan et al., 2007), has been developed over several years within communication research and can be expressed by the following names, *RACE* (Research, Action, Communication and Evaluation) by Marston (1963) and *ROPE* (Research, Objective, Programming and Evaluation) by Hendrix and Hayes (2012). Within Public Relations cam-

paign strategies, Kendall (1997) developed *RAISE* (Research, Application, Implementation, Strategy and Evaluation. In 2000, researcher Crifasi established *ROSIE* (Research, Objective, Strategy, Implementation and Evaluation) (Smith, 2017, p.16). Overall, one can further see that there are different approaches to strategy processes and strategy implementation which can be based on different organizational needs and current situations, however, they are all familiar in their structure.

Tibbie (1997) and Simcic Brønn (2001) presents a more dynamic perspective where communication is seen as a dialogue rather than a fixed framework. This approach can also be viewed through SAP, which emphasizes that strategy is created and reshaped through practical activities and social interactions. Gulbrandsen and Just (2016) see strategic communication as the result of negotiations between the organization and its stakeholders, which is consistent with SAP's focus on how strategy is developed through continuous practice.

Heide, Johansson and Simon (2021) further argue that communication should be seen as a social construction where value is created through interaction. This approach can also be seen as intertwined with SAP's perspective, where strategy is created and shaped through interactions and practical activities. According to Gulbrandsen and Just (2016), communicative practices can be understood as an ongoing process where strategic goals and activities work together to create and implement strategy. This understanding of communication as a strategic practice is crucial to understanding how strategic decisions are formed and implemented in practice. Johnson et al. (2003) emphasize the importance of focus on micro-strategic activities, as these involve the actions and strategic measures taken by individuals within the organization during the strategy process.

Falkheimer and Sandberg (2018) emphasize the importance of understanding communication as a strategic practice within organizations. Their research highlights how communication is not only a tool for implementing strategies, but also a central part of the strategy work itself. This perspective means that strategic communication is an active and interactive process where strategy forms and reshapes through communication practices.

Strategic communication can be seen as an iterative process where communication activities contribute to shaping strategic decisions and where strategies are developed through ongoing dialogue and interaction within and outside the organization. This view of communication as strategic practice means that the line between planning and implementation becomes blurred, and strategy work becomes an ongoing process of meaning-making and adaptation to changing circumstances.

Within the framework of Strategy-as-Practice (SAP), communicative activities can be seen as part of the practices that frames the strategy work. Practitioners, i.e. the individuals involved in strategy processes, use communication as a central tool to negotiate, interpret and implement strategic decisions. Practices, the concrete activities and routines that make up the strategy work, including various forms of communication such as meetings, presentation materials, informal discussions and formal documents. Praxis, which includes coherent activities and processes, shows how strategies are developed through a combination of planning and new activities where communication plays a key role (Whittington, 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2005).

Research by Gulbrandsen and Just (2016) shows how strategic communication in practice often involves a process of negotiation and co-creation where different actors contribute to shaping the strategic direction through their interpretations and actions. In other words, strategic communication is both a tool for implementing strategic decisions and an arena where strategic ideas and forms of direction. Whittington (2006) describes how communication within SAP is not only a medium for transferring information, but also a way to create meaning and coordination within organizations. By acting in communicative activities, practitioners contribute to shaping the strategic agenda and engage in strategic goals and means are understood and accepted at different levels within the organization.

An important aspect of communicative practice is the way it adheres to sensemaking, where individuals and groups make sense of complex and often ambiguous strategic situations. Weick's (1995) theory of sensemaking emphasizes that communication is central to how meaning is constructed and shared within organizations. Through communication, actors can interpret and reinterpret strategic actions, adjust their approaches and coordinate their efforts to achieve common goals.

Falkheimer and Sandberg (2018) highlights that strategic communication is also a context-bound practice, where communicative activities and strategic decisions are shaped by the specific social, cultural and organizational contexts. This means that the understanding and implementation of strategic communication must be adapted to the unique conditions of each organization and its environment. Strategic communication is a central part of strategy development and implementation. By integrating Strategy-as-Practice and the sensemaking perspectives, we can gain a deeper understanding of how strategies are formed, communicated and implemented in practice. This comprehension highlights the importance of seeing strategic communication as a dynamic and interactive process where meaning is created and strategic directions are developed through communicative activities and social interaction.

2.4. Sensemaking Theory

Karl E. Weick (1995) introduced the concept of Sensemaking in order to highlight how people create meanings of social phenomena and how they are trying to interpret their meaning. In a deepening of this concept, Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) sees sensemaking as a retrospective process in which humans construct comprehensible images and interpretations to justify their actions. This means that we as humans strives to understand the unknown in order to act in a meaningful way. In the process of sensemaking, we assign some sort of existence to various phenomena by trying to connect them with predetermined categories and concepts. Sensemaking is strongly influenced by individuals' needs and prior beliefs rather than objective facts. This means that an event can be interpreted in different ways by different individuals based on their personal background and experiences. Sensemaking is thus not only about perceiving reality, but also about constructing it based on our own experiences and understandings (Weick et al., 2005).

Sensemaking is an ongoing process in which we assign meaning to our experiences, which fundamentally shapes our self-image, our relationship with others, our involvement in communities and how we navigate through work tasks and social contexts. According to Weick et al. (2005), sensemaking involves a constant search for clues that can fill the gaps we experience before forming our interpretations and meanings. This process of sensemaking is dynamic and ongoing, where meaning is created which then influences our actions and our identity. Through communication and interaction with other people, we convey and strengthen our interpretations of reality through symbolic representations and linguistic expressions. Weick et al. (2005) argue that situations, organizations and environments are "spoken into existence" (2005, p.412), through this process of sensemaking, demonstrating the profound impact that sensemaking has on how we perceive and navigate our surroundings.

Weick (1995) is particularly focused on studying sensemaking in organizational contexts. A central insight is that organizations are not simply static structures but are rather constructed and maintained through continuous conversations and interpretations by its members (Weick et al., 2005). The researchers emphasize that sensemaking and organizations are interdependent; that they are formed and emerge through the sensemaking process. A fundamental function of organizations is to collect and organize human action, which in turn is guided and directed by decisions, rules and shared meanings (Weick et al., 2005). The sensemaking process is thus about the relationship between action and interpretation, where our interpretations

and understandings of the outside world are shaped and informs our actions within organizational contexts.

Weick (1995) emphasizes that both decision-making and communication are two crucial aspects of the sensemaking process. According to him, actions become meaningful through dialogue and interaction, which emphasizes the importance of communication in creating understanding and meaning (Weick et al., 2005). Although full understanding is not always necessary before acting, people can still address problems and make decisions based on a basic understanding that leads to current long-term goals.

Although sensemaking is an important theoretical framework for analyzing and understanding various phenomena, it is not sufficient to fully explain and understand the importance of insights and insight-driven communication within strategic processes in practice. In order to gain a deeper comprehension of how these phenomena are applied and influenced, the study needs to supplement the theory of sensemaking with other theoretical perspectives. In this context, the Strategy-as-Practice theory is particularly relevant as it focuses on the strategy process itself and provides a suitable framework for understanding the importance of insight-driven communication within the research field.

2.4.1. Sensemaking and SAP: An Intertwined Understanding

Within SAP, Sensemaking offers a complementary dimension by highlighting the cognitive and interpretive processes that lie behind the creation of insights. Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and Strategy-as-Practice (Jarzabkowski, 2005) connects on several levels. SAP focuses on practical and social activities in strategy work, Sensemaking highlights how these activities are interpreted and given meaning by the actors. This combination offers a holistic view of strategy development, where both actions and interpretations are considered. When strategic planning and decisions are made within organizations, it is through Sensemaking that these decisions are understood and adapted in practice. Strategy-as-Practice's emphasis on practice shows how strategies are shaped and changed through daily activities and social interaction, while Sensemaking provides insight into the mental models and interpretive frameworks used to navigate and manage these activities.

An important aspect of Sensemaking is reflection, that individuals reflect on past experiences and events to understand current situations. This reflective approach helps actors make meaningful connections between past strategic decisions and current actions, which in

turn influence future strategic choices. This process is central to understanding how strategy is developed and reshaped over time within organizations.

This intertwined understanding highlights the importance of seeing strategy development as a dynamic and continuous process. Strategic plans are not fixed and permanent but must be constantly renegotiated and adapted based on the meaning given to them by the actors. Therefore, it is necessary to understand both the practical activities and the interpretive processes that shape strategies within organizations.

By integrating Strategy-as-Practice with previous research, we gain a comprehensive understanding of how strategies are developed and implemented through practical activities and social interactions. The SAP theory offers a deep insight into how strategies are formed through continuous practice by practitioners, while sensemaking provides an explanation for how meaning and interpretation are created and influence strategic decisions. Together, these perspectives provide an overall awareness of strategic practice and how it is applied within different organizational contexts, especially in communication and agency operations.

3. Methodology

In this method chapter, the research paradigm and the choice of methodology are discussed, including the choice of qualitative research interviews, material collection method, sampling selection, the quality of the study, reflexivity and ethical considerations[1]. The analysis method is explained and the empirical material is justified. In addition, the study's methodological limitations and reliability are discussed.

3.1. Research Approach

3.1.1. Social Constructivism

By choosing Sensemaking and Strategy-as-Practice as theoretical frameworks for exploring the role of insights and insight-driven communication within strategy processes, it is suitable to investigate the connection between these theories and the tradition of Social Constructivism. Within the social constructivist perspective, reality is viewed as subjectively constructed and continuously shaped by interactions and interpretations (Prasad, 2017). The perspective believes that there is no objective truth, instead it advocates for a diversity of interpretations and understandings that are dependent on the individual's social and cultural context. Knowledge within social constructivism is seen as socially constructed, where individuals collectively create and negotiate meaning and understanding through interaction and communication (Prasad, 2017). This framework emphasizes that insights and understandings are dynamic, shaped and modified through social processes and interactions with the environment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The Interpretive Tradition, a component within social constructivism, further emphasizes the active role of individuals in the creation process of meaning and understanding. Symbolic Interactionism (Flick, 2023), a sub-tradition within the interpretive tradition, focuses on how individuals, through interaction, shape and change their own and others' insights and understandings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study which aims to explore and understand the role of insights in strategic communication research and its application to strategy

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[1] *The interviewees' consent form with signatures is not included in the research paper due to confidentiality.*

processes, the perspective of social constructivism is central. By viewing knowledge and insights as socially constructed, it becomes essential to understand how these processes are influenced by the agencies' interactions and interpretations.

3.2. Data Collection Method

Building upon the foundations of qualitative research methods outlined by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), the study seeks to explore the essence of insights and their role in strategy processes within the agency industry. Qualitative research, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), is particularly effective in deepening the understanding of phenomena by capturing the complexity and richness of real-world contexts. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how insights are created, interpreted and implemented within strategic frameworks. Interpretive research, a common approach in qualitative research, acknowledges the existence of multiple realities or interpretations of a single phenomenon. This perspective is crucial for understanding how different stakeholders within agencies perceive and utilize insights. Interpretive research, which is the most common form of qualitative research, assumes that there is rather several realities or interpretations of a single phenomenon.

3.2.1. Qualitative Research Interviews

Based on qualitative research as a methodological choice, semi-structured interviews are applied to answer the study's research questions. Semi-structured interviews enable a deeper understanding of various phenomena and patterns in people (Brinkmann, 2022). According to the researcher Brinkmann (2022), the interview should be seen as an interaction where information and opinions are requested from the interviewer. This method enables me as a researcher to gather insights based the respondents' thoughts, experiences and feelings (Patton, 2015), which is essential for the study's research area.

Semi-structured interviews are considered particularly suitable for enabling an open and flexible interaction between the researcher and the respondent (Merrian & Tisdell, 2016). According to Brinkmann (2022), this flexibility can be decisive since people often share information that does not necessarily fit into a strict structure, and this is important to acknowledge in order to gain a full understanding of the subject. Compared to strictly structured interviews, semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity for a more dynamic dialogue (Brinkmann, 2022), which can promote the knowledge production the study seeks. By creating room for

follow-up-questions and following the respondents' perspectives, I can gain a richer and more diverse understanding of the chosen research field.

In the field of semi-structured interviews, the interview itself is usually guided by a list of questions or areas that the researcher wants to explore, as we can see in *Appendix 2* (Interview Guide). This approach means that the interview does not necessarily need to be conducted as the exact wording or order of the questions, the interview guide should rather be seen as a guide between the different fields. The questions should be open-ended, which creates an opportunity to discover new information and ideas by letting the respondent lead the conversation (Merrian & Tisdell, 2016; Flick, 2023). According to the sensemaking perspective (Weick, 1995), semi-structured interviews enable a reflective and interpretable application of the respondent's answers. This gives the respondent the opportunity to reflect, discuss experiences and give meaning to their actions. Just as in sensemaking, semi-structured interviews demand a flexible approach, allowing the researcher to explore the respondent's answers in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the subject's complexity.

Despite the advantages of interviews as a research method, it is important to be aware of the method's limitations. The researcher's bias can influence the results by interpreting or listening for information that supports their preconceived assumption (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). It is therefore important to be aware and manage this risk to ensure the validity of the given results.

3.2.2. Sampling Selection

To address the study's research questions, which aim to understand the importance of insights within strategy processes in the agency industry, Purposive Sampling has been used as a sampling method to select respondents. This method is part of the qualitative collection method known as Non-Probability Sampling (Tracy, 2013), which implies that the selection is knowingly based on the nature or competence of the participants within the current research area (Merrian & Tisdell, 2016).

According to Patton (2015), the strength and logic of qualitative Purposive Sampling lie in its ability to achieve a deeper understanding of the research area by generating information-rich cases", from "good informants" (Flick, 2023). These cases are expected to provide valuable insights and contribute to new knowledge on the subject. Flick (2023) suggests that respondents must meet certain criteria; they should have solid knowledge and expertise on the subject, the ability to reflect and provide informative answers and a willingness to participate

in the study. In addition to Flick's (2023) basic criteria, the study has applied specific selection criteria relevant to the research purpose. For this study, the criteria have focused on competence and experience in the communication industry:

(1) The participant is employed by a communications agency that offers strategic communications solutions.

(2) The participant has experience with insight-based methods or tools within strategy processes.

(3) The participant has experience in the creative production, which aims to create and develop insights.

(4) The participant has direct experience of being involved in strategy processes within the communications agency. This may include planning, developing and implementing strategies.

These criteria were chosen to ensure that the selected participants can provide relevant and useful information to fulfill the study's objectives. The selection began by reviewing which communication agencies that work with insights, insight-driven processes and thus insight-driven communication, by studying their websites. A total of 26 communication agencies were selected and invited via email to participate in the study, 14 agencies responded and nine agencies agreed to participate. Although a larger sample size could offer broader insights and perspectives, the participants from nine agencies in this study still make valuable and meaningful contributions to our understanding of insight-driven communication practices.

3.2.3. Data Gathering Procedures

The interviews were conducted both through the digital platform Google Meet and in person in nearby cities where I was stationed. By conducting most interviews digitally, it was possible for the respondents to participate from their workplaces during hectic periods, thereby making the conversations more accessible. The interviews were recorded with the respondents' consent and transcribed immediately afterwards to ensure that no essential information was missed. Transcribing an interview directly after the conversation allows for stronger evaluation before the analysis process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Flick (2023), the use of recording technology enables independent documentation and facilitates a more

natural flow of conversation, akin to normal interactions between two individuals without being affected by the writing process (Flick, 2023).

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that various aspects can influence the respondents' answers, which can be decisive for the analysis work (Merrian & Tisdell, 2016). The respondents' answers are reflections of their understandings of the situations or their experiences related to the research purpose. Therefore, each respondent's answer must be analyzed in relation to the others' responses to ensure a comprehensive understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The audio recordings were transcribed by the Swedish transcription company Klang.ai (Klang.ai, 2024), which allowed for a faster transcription process. The company has created their own Swedish AI model, which enables automatic summaries and notes from the recorded conversations. Given that the audio files contained confidential and sensitive information, Klang.ai was chosen for its encryption of all traffic and files. For other sensitive projects, they do also offer customizable operating settings to achieve even higher security levels.

3.2.4. Validity

Qualitative research, according to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), is considered a process where validation is a central component that should permeate every step of the research process. Validation is seen as a process of control, questioning and theorizing, where validity is characterized by transparency (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). To ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research, it is essential to conduct the research study in an ethical manner. This research, which aims to explore and understand the role insights play in strategy processes within strategic communication and how insights are integrated and used to shape communication strategies through qualitative methods, relates to the internal view of validity.

This perspective on validity influences the selection of methods, design, data collection method, analysis and interpretation of information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Within this framework, the study has relied on strong research methods and an appropriate research design to ensure that the data collection is reliable and relevant. By using qualitative interviews as a data collection method, the research has enabled a deeper understanding of the subject. In order to increase internal validity, the research material has included member checks, also known as respondent validation. This means that the participants have been given the opportunity to review my interpretation of their answers, quotes and other comments, which reduces the risk of misconceptions or prejudices. Another aspect contributing to internal validity is

the researcher's awareness that human behavior is dynamic, allowing the study to focus on diverse perspectives and a holistic approach. Finally, a transparent analysis methodology has been applied to accurately interpret the data and to draw well-founded conclusions about the importance of insights in strategy processes.

3.2.5. Reflexivity Statement

I considered my own bias since I am deeply committed to strategy as a phenomenon and has previously practiced at a communications agency where the concept of insight-driven communication was frequently applied. Through this experience, I developed an interest in understanding the real meaning of insights and their role in strategic processes within communication research. Despite my previous experience and personal interest in the subject, the awareness of the possible risk of bias and subjectivity are highlighted. Therefore, I strived to maintain objectivity and independence in the conduct of the study. Within social constructivism and interpretive tradition (Prasad, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), it is of great importance to study the subject without allowing personal opinions or preconceived assumptions to influence the interpretation of the results.

3.3. Ethical Consideration

Due to the potential risk regarding communication consultants feeling concerned about sharing sensitive business information and diverse practical approaches, Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) proposes three ethical guidelines for qualitative research; informed consent, confidentiality and the role of the researcher. Firstly, all the participants signed an informed consent form (See Appendix 1), which meant that they were informed about the use of their information and answers as well as their rights as participants in the study. This also included making them aware that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw whenever they wished. Secondly, for confidentiality, all participants were anonymous in the study, likewise their workplace, coworkers and potential client names that were shared. The material where then transcribed using anonymous codes. This requirement was particularly relevant given the sensitive nature of information being shared. Thirdly, the role of the researcher was too a decisive factor in ensuring ethical manner of the study. This implies that I as a researcher has the responsibility and morality to handle questions and opinions in a fair and respectful manner during the interview process and in the research process.

3.4. Data Analysis Plan

As this research study aims to generate knowledge and understanding around the role of insights in strategy work, specifically the importance of insight-driven communication conducted by communication agencies, the study has an exploratory focus. To gain a thorough understanding of the concepts and to place them in an academic context, the empirical material has been analyzed using a thematic view with an abductive approach. This involves identifying different themes and patterns using codes extracted from the empirical material (Eksell & Thelander, 2014), which then are analyzed together with theory, namely Sensemaking and Strategy-as-Practice. This is seen as a "freer" and more dynamic approach according to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015).

An abductive methodology allows me as a researcher to move freely between empirical material, its thematization and theory to develop different reasoning that further can explain the study's research phenomena (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) and Eksell and Thelander (2014) further emphasize that repeated sorting of material and identified codes is of great importance for the analysis process to discover different patterns and perspectives. This reasoning guided the creation of preliminary codes, categories, and themes, as I began the preparatory work of creating codes in each transcription file. I gave each communication agency a color to differentiate them more easily. After color-coding and creating initial codes, I identified temporary categories and entered agency responses associated with each code and color into a new document.

The thematization was then initiated based on the research purpose and the three research questions (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). I created three tables, aligning the codes where they were best suited. The mapping process allowed for a clear visualization of which codes belonged in each field and I was thereby able to begin the identification process of different category names. This resulted in each research question receiving two to three categories. Placing each code in the different categories can be seen as a dynamic process (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), as I shifted my focus between the empirical material and its placements several times, as there were some codes that could be applied to several areas. When the categories and their codes began to feel reasonable in relation to the research questions, three overarching themes were identified: (1) From disorder to clarity, (2) Insights as a creative springboard and (3) Human insight compass.

4. Analysis and Findings

The analysis section discusses the ability to interpret the meaning of insights, the process of how insights are created within communication agencies, the practical usage of the concept within client projects, and the transition from insight to creative communication efforts. Through an abductive approach, the empirical material is analyzed together with the Sensemaking theory and the Strategy-as-Practice theory.

4.1. From Disorder to Clarity

4.1.1. The Art of Developing Insights

Before the consultants' first interview phase, they showcased a strong interest in discussing insights and insight-driven communication. Several respondents took the initiative to independently discuss the concept and even asked me, as the researcher, about my perspective on the phenomena. This approach changed the interview format from a classic semi-structured format to deep conversations where both the respondents and I collaboratively explored various approaches and topics. These interactions led to co-creation, resulting in new understandings.

When asked how the consultants view insights and what characteristics these might have, the consultants described insights as deep and immediately understanding, akin to an "aha" experience or a "wow" factor. They likened insights to moments when two synapses connect, producing something new that offers fresh perspectives and ways of thinking, akin to an analysis of external stimuli. This comprehension aligns closely with Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), which emphasizes sudden understanding and cognitive connection. An "aha" experience or a "wow" factor represents an abrupt shift in how information is interpreted and understood, which is central within the sensemaking process.

Based on the respondents' answers, it can further be suggested that the concept of insights is multifaceted and can be perceived differently depending on the individual and the context. Despite being the same phenomenon, different interpretations and understandings can highlight its varied meaning.

"It's like an aha experience. When you have gathered the facts, you can draw a conclusion based on them about, in our case, communication, which target group... Based on the target group's driving forces and barriers, what they land in. What do we have to do to help, usually with a brand move or behavioral change. So really a… How to describe it in one sentence? An understanding of the target group and the problems that needs to be fixed. These are not facts you can present directly, doing so might result in rambling. There are this many women, this many men and this is what they like. You have to understand what all this really means." (Consultant 2)

The communication consultants participated enthusiastically in the discussions about the characteristics that constitutes an insight and how to work in an insight-driven manner. However, the majority of the consultants noted the complexity of defining an insight or explaining how to generate insights in a single sentence. Instead, they suggested that insight-driven work should be viewed as a comprehensive methodology. According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is not only about understanding the world but also about creating structures and routines for managing and interpreting information. Hence, seeing insight-driven work as a methodology and a way of working can further suggest that the consultants have developed structured methods for engaging in sensemaking processes.

"Insights are fun because you can't just order them and say that they will appear, you have to work, you have to stand and dig in the garden and eventually you will come across something. That's how it works, and if you don't dig, you won't find anything." (Consultant 1)

"I would say that insights are somehow in front of us, but you have to interpret the data and facts that exist to really understand what something is about. You get access to the information directly but not the insight." (Consultant 5)

By reflecting on insight-driven communication and the importance of insights, the consultants demonstrate a form of reflexivity. They questioned and challenged their own understanding while simultaneously contributing to shaping my view of the subject. This reflexive practice is central to Strategy-as-Practice (Whittington, 2003), where practitioners (the consultants) continuously re-evaluate and adapt their strategic approaches based on interactions and expe-

riences (c.f. Golsorkhi et al., 2007). The consultants emphasize that this way of working is not only a methodology for thinking, acting and understanding themselves, others, and the world around them, they see something deeper within the information that "ordinary" people cannot directly identify. This view emphasizes a specific perspective of the phenomenon, while an alternative point of view could understand this sphere as a form of culture that both affects and is affected by its actors (c.f. Bourdieu, 1984; Shove et al., 2012; Schatzki, 2019). The understanding thus extends beyond what the consultants express during the interviews and should perhaps truly be seen as a certain cognitive mindset.

Furthermore, the daily work within the agency industry involves supporting clients in effectively reaching their target groups with various communicative messages. This insight work enables creative depth in the creation of these communication activities accordingly to the consultants.

> "In our industry, an insight is when you have knowledge about your target group. Which is better and more important than raw data, and it's about going deep and understand who the target audience is and what their needs are. It's about producing real insights based on the target group's real challenges." (Consultant 4)

Some consultants believe that insights are about gaining a greater understanding of something outside of the box. Additionally, other consultants suggested that insight-driven work involves basing the work on evidence and building multiple layers upon that foundation. As consultant 2 explains;

> "Anchoring your work to evidence means that you don't just guess or go by feeling, it shows that you actually have a solid foundation for your statements, which also means that you later land more correctly when developing concepts and campaigns. It further leads to the fact that the communication efforts do not disseminate or that advertising campaigns are only attractive in terms of advertising, without actually reaching the specific target group." (Consultant 2)

Based on Weick's (1995) sensemaking reasoning, one can further argue that consultants strive to create understanding and meaning for the social constructions (gathered information) in order to place the knowledge in a relevant context. Additionally, the majority of responding

consultants believe that insights form the basis of how to creatively solve clients' problems. It is not about creating a catchy ad headline, but about doing something meaningful and engaging for the target audience.

This reasoning do also align with Osuna-Mascaró and Auersperg's (2021) definition of an insight as a "source of creative production". The consultants emphasize the importance of "doing something for real". They believe that insights lay the foundation for creative thinking, but ultimately, it narrows down to the questions "Why are we doing this?" and "What does this mean for the target audience?", which stems from the sensemaking perspective's (Weick, 1995) need to constantly search for meaning, interpretation and relevance.

> "When you put a lot of facts or data on the table, you have to think; What do we have? What do we know?. We enter with different perspectives and we have a problem to solve. Then we collect information about the target group, about driving forces and what they are interested in. Is there symbolism that is interesting to them? What motivates them? What is interesting in this context?. We can talk as much as we want about numbers and statistics, but fundamentally it is the human being that matters most and what drives them to make different choices. You should always have that in mind."
> (Consultant 6)

Furthermore, one can get the impression that the consultants see the process of converting data into insights as something more profound than one might initially think. While the concept of insight itself is widely understood in various segments, the participating consultants feel that insight work involves something deeper and more comprehensive than just a surface analysis. One can interpret this reasoning based on the consultants believing that insights are embedded in the data, which requires a more nuanced and thoughtful approach to discover underlying factors, patterns and meanings. This reasoning further demonstrates that the consultants, based on a meaning-making perspective (Weick et al., 2005), believe that insights are constructed through a dynamic interpretation process, where the meaning of something is actively created and refined to become something new.

4.1.2. Navigating Tensions and Aligning Group Dynamics

Data and information form the basis of how insights are created. The consultants highlight a clear transition regarding working methods from quantitative to qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. This shift indicates an increased focus on generating and understanding deeper insights and behavioral patterns of target groups, rather than simply collecting large amounts of data. Based on the empirical material, it is possible to distinguish consultants who primarily work qualitatively from those who prefer quantitative data. Additionally, it appears that quantitative data is regarded as a description of the past, while qualitative data provides insights for the future and how different trends progress.

> "I don't know, it might sound cheesy, but I think quantitative insights are kind of… they're boring. It's been like this... Last month it was like this, now it looks like this. Then you have to make a prediction, that if it looks like this and we are going to do this other thing, the curve will probably look like this. So, I think it's more challenging because I'm like that as a person, there are others who think that the quantitative way is amazingly beautiful and simple. I think that is the difference, that you can see how it has been. You can't do much about it though. When you sit down and do qualitative research, it's easier." (Consultant 5)

The difference in data collection methods appears to stem from the varied areas of work in which the agencies operate. Consultants who advocate quantitative data work in areas such as digitization, web development and other technologies. In contrast, those who favor qualitative methods tend to focus on sectors where human behavior and habits are predominant, such as with working with authorities and private companies. The perspective within Strategy-as-Practice becomes evident when consultants adapt their methods based on their respective work areas (c.f. Whittington, 1996). Despite different methodologies, they share a common ambition, to extract valuable insights. In this research study, Strategy-as-Practice is reflected in multiple ways through the consultants' varying approaches and perceptions of insight-driven communication. The consultants act as active practitioners of strategy (c.f. Whittington, 1996) by implementing and discussing different methods of data collection and analysis. A clear tension emerges between those who prefer quantitative methods and those who favor qualitative approaches. This difference reflects not only their professional preferences but also their views on data as a tool for understanding and predicting client behaviors and trends.

Despite the consultants' strong interest in creating and using insights and insight-driven communication in work processes, the concept has recently received more attention within various industries and businesses. The consultants regard the concept as a key concept to achieving efficiency and relevance within various communicative solutions, however, they also acknowledge that is has been perceived as a trend concept, which raises questions about its actual value in practice. The consultants reflected on the phenomenon and shared their views with the majority seeing it as an engaging and attractive trend that interests clients and potentially serves as an additional source of income.

> "Then it's in our industry... it's a bit pointless. There are always different conceptual trends about what to do. And titles are just… it's a science of its own, all these long different titles that people have to compare to, and this is how it's been in our industry all along. New concepts are added that feel a bit cool and then everyone wants to do it." (Consultant 2)

Furthermore, the empirical material reveals skepticism among consultants regarding the authenticity of insight-driven practices across all communication agencies. One consultant questions whether these agencies genuinely adopt insight-driven methodologies or merely employ the term as a popular phrase to attract clients. Consultant 8 explains;

> "In a way, I think it's great that the concept has gained attention, but of course there is always a risk now when everyone wants to work insight-driven, because I think, well, what do those agencies do then, because I don't think they really works so insight-driven." (Consultant 8)

The consultants' collaboration and the resulting tensions reflect the principles of collaboration within the Strategy-as-Practice framework, where the connection between practitioners, their clients and the work processes are central. Despite their shared goal of being insight-driven, there is concern that the concept has become a trend lacking deeper practical value. This reflection underscores the tension between the idealized assumption of insight-driven communication and its actual application within the industry. Notably, no other consultant commented on whether other agencies genuinely adhere to insight-driven practices. Instead, they highlighted the challenge in determining whether published communication efforts, such as campaigns and advertisements, are truly based on insights or not. The focus, they argue, should be

on factors that distinguish agencies, particularly their competence in creating unique solutions and communication efforts for their clients.

Clear tensions exist among the consultants regarding the definition, methodology and practical application of insight-driven practices. These differences are revealed in various aspects of their work, from data collection methods to the use of insights in communication strategies. Such tensions reflect a dynamic and multifaceted industry where different approaches coexist and occasionally collide (c.f. Tibbie, 1997). Nevertheless, the overarching goal remains to achieve a deeper understanding and more effective communication.

4.1.3. Collaborative Hypothesis Development

Based on the consultants' discussions about insights and insight-driven communication, the process can be understood as naturally co-creative, both internally among colleagues and through various forms of client engagement. This perspective aligns with Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework, which emphasizes on collective interaction in the creation of meaning. Within communication agencies, consultants often rely on each other to develop innovative ideas, working methods and to benefit from each other's skills. This dynamic can be further understood through Winkler and Etter's (2008) concept of emergent strategies, which highlights reflection, new opportunities and organizational learning. When asked about involving clients in the insight process and overall strategy work, consultant 1 stated, *It is definitely a large part of the consulting profession and consultant,* and 7 affirmed, *Yes, you have to do that. It doesn't work otherwise.* These citations demonstrates the essential interaction and cooperation between agencies and their client companies.

Furthermore, the agencies believe that client engagement is crucial, as client projects are built on cooperation and co-creation throughout various project stages, including insight creation. This involves gathering information from clients about their needs, vision, problems to be solved, target audiences, and strategies. As consultant 6 noted, although communication consultants generally have a lot of knowledge about various communication activities, they do not have all the information, *We cannot predict how our clients will react to our proposals, but we believe that in collaboration with the client, we can challenge existing ways of working for a better outcome* (Consultant 6). This perspective aligns with Heide, Johansson and Simonsson's (2021) view that communication should be seen as a value-creating and social construction, reflecting the integral role of clients in the agencies' work processes.

"You kind of have to meet the client, discuss with them and show cases, and really talk about what you mean, so to speak. You have to get a chance to talk about the needs in depth with the clients." (Consultant 1)

"...they also know their industry and their clients, and they are the ones who possess a lot of data. In practice, the projects cannot be done without the client." (Consultant 2)

In the process of developing solutions and understanding the client's needs and desires, most of the responding consultants initiate their projects with a brief workshop, where they review current knowledge and areas that are considered unclear. Consultant 2 explains;

"You start by having a workshop and look at what we know and what we don't know. So that you crystallize it, what data is available and so on. What are their goals and how should we work to reach them? So, first a meeting and then you get all the material. Then it often happens that you will have additional questions that you either pick up the phone for or take in an email or quick meeting. This one, what is it about?. And they are often sitting on a lot of information that they may not have said all about. Then when we summarize everything and present it to them, we often have some kind of presentation where we go through everything and develop the foundation together. Then there is one.. you will probably get into strategies later in the interview, because it is also regarding... even if you get an insight and create a proposal for a strategy, it is not certain that they have a budget for it, and then you may have to slim it down, but all this takes place in conversation and discussion with the client." (Consultant 2)

Consultant 8 further believes that an essential part of the daily project process, in addition to understanding the client's needs and their industry, involves generating insights about competitors and market trends, areas where the client company often possesses significant competence and experience in. Communication, while often taken for granted, becomes crucial in these situations. By actively discussing and reflecting together with their clients, consultants create an interactive and co-creative process where new understandings and perspectives are developed. This process exemplifies how strategies are formulated and adapted through social interaction and collective learning (c.f. Whittington, 2006). Rather than merely following tra-

ditional routines or methods, consultants engage in dynamic and in-depth conversations that foster strategic learning and insight. Consultant 8 elaborates, *We see it as a joint and co-creative process where, together with the client, we create understanding and different solutions to meet the needs and goals that exist.*

> "We try to see it from the client's point of view and it's really about understanding our client. Understand them, understand the product, understand the service, whatever it is about. Understand what they stand for. Who do they see as their target groups? What do they know today about their target groups? Which channels do the target groups use today? How is the client trying to reach out? How do they use their communication today? Who are their biggest competitors? How do they communicate?. I'm also looking for that, of course." (Consultant 5)

During these co-creative meetings, consultants sometimes face challenges with client companies, highlighting not only inter-agency tensions but also those arising in client collaborations. When asked if they have experienced challenges during the projects, consultant 4 replied, *Yes absolutely, it's probably quite common. After all, we create solutions based on the challenges and needs that exist and we are happy to challenge those needs, and it often happens that the client is a little hesitant or says no to an idea.* Within the sensemaking perspective, managing conflicts and tensions is also a significant aspect (cf. Weick et al., 2005), but it is also connected to their agile work flow (c.f. Aghina et al., 2018) regarding acting as an living organism in changing environments. Challenging clients and their established ways of working can lead to friction, but it is also integral to the process of creating a more nuanced and meaningful understanding that can lead to better solutions.

Challenging clients and their prevailing methods appears to be common among the agencies. Despite thorough data analysis and the production of insights, clients can sometimes acknowledge the consultants' perspectives but prefer alternative approaches. However, some agencies have clients who expect and welcome these challenges.

> "In our core idea, we say that we must be brave and we have agreements with almost all of our clients where we say that we will challenge them when it is something they want. What do we usually say? Twice, the third time we back off. Sometimes I talk about how many chilies we can run, two chilies, one, or none at all?" (Consultant 6)

Although the agencies' clients are involved in the work processes at various stages, most of the insight and creative work occurs internally within the agencies. Based on the responses provided, it is clear that the consultants do not adhere to a strict template, but rather employ an iterative and adaptable methodology. By incorporating diverse skills such as strategists, creators and project managers within the work group, an adaptable dynamic is fostered where different perspectives and expertise contribute to generating ideas and solving problems.

> "As a Planner, I usually go through all the material we have received from the client. After I look at problems, purposes, goals and ideas, among other things, I start threshing the material and it is a dynamic process. There is so much information that you cannot always go into detail. It's a very messy process. Then we sit down in the working group where I present what I have come up with and then the others get to contribute with their view on it." (Consultant 6)

As consultant 6 emphasizes, Gulbrandsen and Just (2016) advocate that strategy should be understood as an ongoing "messy" communication process, where actors work together to create shared insights. Within this mindset, the consultants ensure the development of insights as consultant 6's work and opinions are rooted in the concept of strategic planning (Grünig & Kühn, 2015; Wolf & Floyd, 2017), which use systematic processes to support reasoning and insights.

The consultants highlights that insights go beyond a simple data collection, involving deeper understanding of the strategic context of these facts, which involves interpretation and creative thinking to identify relevant action alternatives (c.f. Whittington, 2003). By discussing and exploring different aspects of insights, such as audience understanding and behavior change, the consultants create a practical framework for how insights can be applied to support creative and effective communication strategies.

The respondents highlight the importance of creative meetings as a central part of the process, where they further explain that these meetings serve as a platform to explore and discuss together. Through creative meetings and active exchange of ideas, team members can benefit from each other's insights and perspectives, allowing developing innovative solutions and create a deeper understanding of the project (c.f. Weick, 1995).

Consultant 9 states, *It's quite difficult to sit with it all by yourself, you need each other to be more than a brain.* This underscores the Strategy-as-Practice (Whittington, 2003), highlighting the importance of close collaboration among consultants to develop and implement communication solutions. Based on the opportunity to share knowledge, experience and best practices with each other in order to understand and manage the complex challenges that may arise, the theory perspective flows through the entire business and into the various client projects.

A fascinating aspect is the flexibility and lack of standardized processes that characterize the working method within the responding agencies. It is emphasized that there is no fixed path to follow from start to finish, but instead it is seen as an adaptable and organic process where team members continuously adapt to changes and challenges that arise during the course of the project. Another essential part of the process is communication and collaboration. Consultant 4 explains that insights are not created in isolation or dependent on one person's perspective but through collaboration and interaction with others. Through active exchange of ideas and challenge discussions within the teams, an environment is created where insights can emerge more naturally (c.f. Mintzberg, 1978).

4.2. Insights as a Creative Springboard

4.2.1. Fostering Creativity for Effective Communication

According to the consultants, insights play an important role in the approaches used by the agencies for strategy creation, providing valuable information for planning and implementing communicative elements within client projects. When asked if they follow a specific framework for client projects, the consultants noted that there are no fixed frameworks for how to work. Instead, their approaches and decisions are fluid, adaptable to the client, needs, time and resources (c.f. Mintzberg, 1978; Greenberg, 2014; Aghina et al., 2018). The consultants mentioned that while traditional research often advocated a linear strategy process – processing from planning and research to implementation and evaluation (c.f. Mintzberg, 1978), that this linear approach is not applicable in practical cases.

> "The different parts that are part of our process wheel often flow into each
> other and, of course, they are adapted a little all the time depending on the
> created insights and how different colleagues or clients view possible ap-
> proaches." (Consultant 1)

The view of practice in Strategy-as-Practice (Whittington, 2003) emphasizes the importance of strategy formation as a dynamic and continuous process. This is reflected in the respondents' description of their circular model of strategic planning. This approach allows consultants to integrate new insights and feedback in real time, which is important when creating effective strategies. They advocate that the concept of "working insight-driven" should be the primary methodology used, with strategic path choices being integral to the entire communication and strategy process. One can further assume that Mintzberg (1994) would have agreed with this reasoning based on his view of the positive effect of incorporating both emergent and planned elements within strategies.

> "Instead of having these blocks that research talks about, we made a circular model. And in it we sort of allow disorder and chaos. Around the circle we have the different blocks and different components, and sometimes we jump between them. And goes back and challenges questions, points of view and turns things around. This way allows for a much more creative process where you make sure that the environment is open-minded, and you make sure to ventilate the problem properly." (Consultant 1)

The consultants utilize a flexible working model that allows them to navigate between different steps in the process, while adhering to fundamental principles. Based on the respondents' answers, it is evident that their approach is grounded in research on strategic planning (Grünig & Kühn, 2015) but interpreted through a modern lens. The interesting thing about this is that the consultants themselves claim that it is not possible to follow academic principles in practical work, while still basing their flexible model on the blocks to a certain extent. This becomes apparent when the consultants discuss creative flows and agile working methods (c.f. Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2016; Roberts & Grover, 2012), in the design and application of these process steps. The emphasis is however, still on the ability to adapt to new insights and modify the process in response to external and internal factors (c.f. Grünig & Kühn, 2015). Consultant 1 explains;

> "I think the best way to describe a strategy process is that it is almost like a creative process. You work in roughly the same way. You sit down and think about the issue, you search for data, you google around, you look at... So, I mean, if you were to make boxes in a PowerPoint it would be like this,

we have an information gathering phase, we have a strategy phase, we have a jada jada phase.. So, you have a number of blocks so to speak. In real life when you work with it, you sit and search and think, you take meetings and interviews and so on as I said, maybe do research... And then the strategy will sort of be formed based on that. And if it's a brand strategy then it's more structured but it's also creative. But then, for example, you put a management group at a company in a room and run workshops. And during those workshops, you have to be good at moderating and interviewing the management team to get the knowledge and information you need. After all, it is both about somehow having this basket of information and then finding the nuggets in them and understanding that they are nuggets of gold. Therefore, you probably need to have a little experience and a little… I have done this quite a lot to understand what is valuable in this basket and what is not. What stands out? What is it that creates attraction and what can you actually throw away?" (Consultant 1)

Consultant 5 touches on the same area and claims;

"We have many different types of projects and we follow a sort of semi-standardized process, you could call it that. But it looks very different depending on whether we are going to make a documentary film or whether we are going to film something else or if we are just doing the insight work itself or a strategy concept for a website. It's a little different then. We fill the processes with slightly different things. But first we usually do some kind of brainstorming phase and then some kind of idea phase and then some production phase. So it's a bit challenging to answer. But if you say generally as I usually do in strategy projects, then it's research, we collect data and then we analyze it and then we come up with some kind of concept track. And based on that, we can hand over to a little more idea generation, and those touchpoints can look a little different." (Consultant 5)

In the quotes, a clear connection to the theory of Strategy-as-Practice appears through the consultants' active role as practitioners (c.f. Whittington, 2001) of strategies. Rather than following strict frameworks, the consultants emphasize the importance of flexibility and adaptability in their approach. They navigate between different stages of the strategy process based

on current needs and circumstances, which is characteristic of practice-oriented approaches in strategy formation. At the same time, consultant 3 tells;

> "You can say that it is somewhere in between. There is no particular framework or basic idea either. And we do it a little per project. We have project planning meetings that say, Okay but how do we do this? What do we need? What should we do about it? When do we have follow-up-meetings? But it is prepared a little, of course. It is probably based on the fact that we have a fairly high average age. We have done this a few times before anyway, so we don't have to think so much about it. Most people know more or less of what to do." (Consultant 3)

It appears that the consultants regard the process work as a dynamic and flexible to new insights and changes, rather than following a strictly established framework. By applying the concept of "working insight-driven", they advocate a dynamic strategy process where different phases works together and adapt based on the needs and circumstances of the project. This approach allows for a more creative and efficient process, emphasizing the importance of being open to challenges and reconsidering previous assumptions.

The consultants do also highlight the significance of combining research-based methods with a practical and flexible application, forming strategies through continuous data collection, analysis and idea generation. They employ concrete approaches such as research, workshops and interviews to collect and analyze data, illustrating how they integrate theoretical insights with practical applications to ensure their strategies are both theoretically grounded and practically feasible. By following a semi-standardized process tailored to each project, the consultants create strategies and concepts that meets the client's unique needs and goals.

4.2.2. Transforming Insights into Strategic Initiatives

One of the consultants vividly illustrated of how information and data are transformed into insights by using the metaphor of "The meat grinder". The consultant described how different data clusters are fed into the meat grinder, undergoing a creative analysis process to explore various questions and perspectives. On the other side of the meat grinder, the finished insights are then presented. The metaphor is an effective and vivid description of how data is processed and transformed to create meaning (c.f. Weick, 1995). The creative analysis process

inside the meat grinder suggests a deeper processing of information, demonstrating practical application within the strategy concept.

> "The meat grinder may be a special term to show how our insight work is done, but I think it is very clear. Sometimes we show the model to our clients so that they can understand more clearly how we work and why we work the way we do." (Consultant 6)

Another interesting aspect is the emphasis on the value of self-generated information. Practice (Jarzabkowski, 2005) becomes clearly prominent in this context. By conducting their own research and analysis, agencies gain access to unique and special insights, that are not available to competitors, providing a competitive advantage and the opportunity to differentiate themselves in the market by offering relevant solutions. It is emphasized that this is not a one-time event but a continuous process. By regularly reviewing and analyzing previous insights, the consultants can improve and adapt their strategies, fostering a culture of continuous learning where client companies invest time and resources to understand and meet the target group's needs and preferences.

The consultants share their thoughts on the transition from insight to action, stressing that it is not enough to merely collect data and draw conclusions. It is crucial to transform data into insights, which then must be converted into concrete actions and decisions subsequently impacting the creative phase following the insight process. They acknowledge that communicating these insights can be challenging but emphasize the importance of simplicity. This underscores the practical application of strategy, where consultants not only identify relevant insights but also drive them towards effective strategic initiatives (c.f. Jarzabkowski, 2005; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009). Consultant 3 states, *If you have a good insight-driven methodology at the bottom with valuable data and valuable facts for the target group, which you know they want, then you don't need to be so complicated in your communication.* Consultant 7 considers similar perspectives.

> "We try to determine which insight is the most important, especially when we do creative work. Because the idea for the creative phase is connected with the insight. But in the strategic work, there is more information that needs to be threshed in the preparatory work. We are working on developing three simple hypotheses. And then we choose a common direction. This in-

sight is the one we believe in. And then we choose it together with our client." (Consultant 7)

Weick (1995) emphasizes that sensemaking is not only about interpreting and understanding information, but also about acting based on these interpretations. Translating insights into decision-making processes is a central part of the sensemaking process, where consultants not only identify what is important, but also implement these insights in practice. Consultant 7 highlights the importance of a hypothesis-based approach within the insight process, suggesting that by formulating clear hypotheses, communication consultants can actively seek and analyze data to confirm or reject their assumptions. Consultant 8 continues;

"You can be really good at environmental analysis. That's fine, but you have to turn it into the question; How do we act on this?. What is the action plan for us? What do we need to look at in our own house? That's where it gets exciting somewhere. So, an insight that does not lead to strategy is, I think, just an interesting anecdote." (Consultant 8)

After the insight proposals are approved, the creative team starts with the production phase. When developing and implementing strategies, a combination of own processes and external models or frameworks is used, demonstrating a flexible and adaptable work methodology. By creating their own processes and models, agencies ensure consistency and effectiveness in their work, while benefiting from external theories (c.f. Grunig, 1992) and frameworks that enrich the process. This illustrates the consultants' ability to navigate between analytical and creative approaches when translating insights into communicative meaning and strategy. This balance between practice (c.f. Whittington, 2001) and the creative process shows how Strategy-as-Practice is integrated into their daily work to deliver effective and engaging communication solutions.

The consultants further argues that the strategies they create are strongly connected to budget and time resources. They need to be realistic in their approaches and constantly consider whether they have the right resources to carry out their activities. Consultant 5 explains;

"Sometimes we have to focus on a specific target group even if the client wants to reach everyone and identify the most effective way to reach them. It requires pragmatic thinking and that we take reality into account. It is

very important to be concrete and action-oriented in our work." (Consultant 5)

Once the strategic framework is in place, the consulting teams enter the creative work phase, where they are allowed to be more exploratory and experimental again. They believe it is important to have a framework to relate to while also having room for creativity and innovation. During this process, they balance being analytical and creative to establish communication that is both effective and engaging. Furthermore, the consultants mention that it is their copywriters who handle the process of converting insights into communicative sentences.

> "No, it's one of my copy colleagues who does it. And then I sometimes say that this is the message we should mediate. But I can't express it like a copy can. Then our copy colleagues starts the creative phase again. But sometimes I say that it is the insight that we should base the content on, and then giving them the opportunity to express their opinions about it as well, so that we have a dialogue about it. It is the best argument that wins, and they are created in dialogue with each other." (Consultant 8)

Consultant 8 is not the only consultant who sees the insight work as a dynamic and iterative process, it is seen as something that flows through the entire client project at different stages. Furthermore, regarding the area of how to communicate one's insights to others, the consultants consider it important to put themselves in the other's position. They emphasize the opportunity to explain what has been done, how the team thought about it and show examples or prototypes to visualize thoughts and ideas. Another consultant refers to the effect chain model that they use, where they sum up everything to present to the client;

> "We have this effect chain model. And it's usually these four steps, but we have added a fifth. Many companies that we work with do also want some form of goal-directed compass, which often touches upon a sustainability focus or another area that is essential for the company. And the long-term social impact. You read this model from left to right, What is the business impact of this? What is the client's way of working? Which behaviors do we need to change? What do we need to communicate? And then we talk about channel strategy and how should we think about PR and partners and so on.

> And what KPIs and CTAs and so on. Before we look at the actual concept
> that we are presenting." (Consultant 2)

The citation from consultant 2 reflects a strategic approach that is consistent with the principles of Strategy-as-Practice (Whittington, 2003) which emphasizes the importance of processes and actions in the design and implementation of a strategy. The described effect chain model illustrates a conscious and active process where strategy is not just an ambition but an ongoing, practical activity that involves continuous adjustments based on clients' goals and values. By incorporating another step into the traditional model, the consultant shows how strategy is an adaptive practice, tailored to meet each organization's specific needs. This approach can demonstrate the importance of not only having a strategy but actively engaging with it through a series of interconnected processes that consider the wider implications for the customer and their aspirations.

Communication in this context is about influencing people by trying to predict how they will think, feel and act. This is challenging considering that humans are complex, irrational and occupied with many other things in life. Planning and predicting the effect of communication can therefore be difficult (c.f. Falkheimer & Sandberg, 2018). However, we can use knowledge about people to increase the chance of achieving the desired effect.

4.3. Human Insight Compass

4.3.1. Emotional Intelligence in Creative Processes

As the consultants previously pointed out, one cannot draw immediate conclusions from the collected data. Careful processing of the material is required, considering different hypotheses and approaches to deliver valuable solutions to the clients. When the respondents were asked how they view insights and whether some insights can be better than others, or how they decide which track to follow, the consultants emphasized that there is a significant difference between different insights. Consultant 9 says;

> "Of course, you can always rank your insights. You don't have to act on
> every insight just because you've produced a bunch of insights. There are
> quite a lot of insights that are quite meaningless." (Consultant 9)

By ranking and prioritizing the insights, the consultants can focus on the most valuable and relevant areas. This also emphasizes the need to filter out trivial or irrelevant insights. This reflects on the sensemaking process, where different interpretive frames are used to process and interpret the information collected (c.f. Weick et al., 2005). The consultants highlight the importance of not only generating insights but also being able to distinguish between those that are meaningful and those that are less relevant.

The consultants further reasoned that the view on insight creation partly stems from the trend of insight-driven communication. They pointed out that anyone can create an insight, which raises questions about how agencies can present insight-driven communication as something interesting and innovative. The consultants mentioned that the value of the insight depends on its importance to the production, the time resources available and the purpose of the project in solving a specific communication problem. Identifying a unique insight often requires a deeper understanding of the target group and the market, and the insight must also be practical in order to be valuable to the communication strategy.

> "You really have to draw a line all the time, I think, depending on time, opportunities and what you get paid for simply. Because it is clear that you can analyze in a fairly short time, but you can also analyze for quite a long time. And really, you're never done. I can say that an insight also many times creates new questions that make you want to get an even deeper insight into what the new questions mean. So I would say that an insight also creates a curiosity for the search for more insights." (Consultant 5)

Some consultants also expressed frustration that insight work is often limited to conversations with high-ranking managers or management teams, instead of involving those who actually interact with the products or services in their everyday lives. According to consultant 8, the real insights should come from the target groups, rather than from those who act as intermediaries or representatives.

> "Another thing I want to say about insight work is that I feel that it is so incredibly common that you do what you call insight work when you have a workshop with a board or a management group and then you ask them. What are your needs? And then they say, we know that because blah, blah, blah. Then they call that insight work instead of skipping over those who will actually use the products. You don't talk to the small builder, but you

talk to the marketing manager at the construction company that sells the products to the builder. You don't talk to those who actually come into contact with these products, services and brands in their daily lives. As you can tell, I might sound a little frustrated because I believe I know best. And I think so too." (Consultant 8)

The discussion highlights the importance of bringing the user perspective into the insight process. Based on insight-driven communication as a trend and the attitude that everyone can generate insights, its function and value are not taken seriously by other businesses and actors. The consultants emphasize that it is crucial to understand how the products or services are used and experienced in everyday life to develop meaningful insights and strategies. An insight that captures attention and leads to a change in behavior is what actually creates value for the communication strategy according to the consultants.

During the interviews, a recurring theme emerged that emphasizes the importance of working with "the heart and the gut";

"You can produce any amount of data, but it is with the heart that you analyze it." (Consultant 4)

"...you often forget what's in the gut and in the heart itself, and you have to add that into the insight work, the gut feeling." (Consultant 6)

"...so if you say that you work insight-driven, it can also be a way for you to justify your thoughts and ideas. It must feel good in your heart about what you are doing." (Consultant 5)

The expressions may seem to indicate that intuitive and emotional aspects are of high importance in the consultants' work processes, even when they have access to extensive data. They emphasize the importance of feeling justified and authentic in their work, which they say comes from including the heart and gut in decision-making. Data in itself is not enough to conclude valuable insights, a personal and emotional connection to the work is required. From Weick's (1995) point of view, this emotional dimension can contribute to a deeper understanding of the context in which the insights are to be implemented. At the same time, this entails a risk, as it can be challenging to distinguish between objective insights and subjective experiences. It is therefore important to find a balance between using data and listening to

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intuition. Data can provide an objective basis, while intuition can contribute a deeper understanding and context that numbers cannot capture.

The saying "Ideas or insights are like the butt, everyone has one" (Consultant 3) underscores the challenge of sifting through different insights to find the most relevant and useful ones. The respondents further believe that it is not enough to have many good insights, but that it is crucial to be able to identify the insights that have the greatest potential to generate the desired results for the communication strategy. The communication consultants' choice of which insights are most useful and valuable derives from Weick et al.'s (2005) approach to understanding complex situations. Furthermore, consultant 6 states, *An insight must also be interesting. So that it can really become a springboard for attention, for behavior change.*

Sensemaking theory emphasizes the use of interpretive frameworks or "frames" to understand and interpret information. It can thus be seen as the consultants are using different lenses or frames to assess which insights fit best into their existing understanding and which can then support the communication strategy. When the consultants are faced with a variety of insights and data, it can be assumed that they apply meaning-making processes to process and interpret the information. It can thus be seen as the consultants choosing insights that can be transformed into powerful stories, making them more meaningful and memorable for the target audience.

4.3.2. "Learning by Doing"

The communication and advertising industry has, in recent decades, undergone significant changes from the point of view of the consultants, especially regarding the use of academic methods and practical methods. One of the most prominent aspects within the advertising industry is the diversity of backgrounds and educations the consultants come from. This is a significant part of the agency industry as the consultants are trained in different ways and bring unique perspectives into their roles.

> "...and partly it is not an industry that has ever worked scientifically in my opinion. I think I was the only one who had studied at university when I started in the advertising industry 25-30 years ago. There weren't many back then. I met almost no academics at times. It was only Berghs students, creators and financial people who became project managers and such." (Consultant 1)

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The consultant's reasoning is interesting in the sense that they claim that the advertising industry has previously been more practically than academically oriented, which can explain the development of practical methods, trends, how to think and act, and where insight-driven communication originally comes from. This underlines how the consultants' educational background affects their approach to strategic work (c.f. Jarzabkowski, 2005) and insight-driven communication. An important aspect within Strategy-as-Practice (Whittington, 2003) is how the consultants integrate their unique perspectives and experiences in their daily work. The variation in training within the same agency illustrates how internal differences can enrich strategic work. Consultant 6 explains;

> "Different agencies have consultants who are educated in different ways. We at our agency do not have the same training or way of looking at things, which means that there is not only a difference between the agencies but also internally." (Consultant 6)

Internal differences can be as great as differences between different agencies. This means that each consultant can contribute unique insights and working methods, which can further enrich the insight work and strategy processes by combining different approaches and skills.

> "More or less, we have always thought that we should work a little more academically and research-driven, and we are actively working towards that more now. But there is such a big difference from practical working life and what you learn academically. And purely academically, in theory there is a way of working, but in practice it doesn't work that way." (Consultant 1)

Some consultants further believe that one is never completely trained or fully learned, and that there is always new information and new knowledge to be obtained. Based on the consultants' responses, it is clear that communications teams are not only relying on traditional training and business journals to stay up to date but are also integrating internal training and workshops to develop their own skills. A relevant observation is that they do not think communication magazines such as Resumé are particularly rewarding, but instead focus on reading the client's business press to deeply understand their specific needs and challenges. It further demonstrates the ability to tailor insights and strategies to each client's unique situation and needs.

> "Advertising industry magazines are not worth reading, because the Resumé we have is more or less a gossip magazine. Not a whole lot of deep academic information there, but it can certainly be entertaining to read." (Consultant 1)

A central theme, despite differences in education and work areas, is the importance of understanding and managing what "captures" clients' interests, which means identifying and solving their problems and needs. By focusing on addressing these 'tensions', the team can create relevant and effective communication strategies that resonate with the target group and lead to the desired results. Consequently, it often occurs that the consultants carry out their own training sessions;

> "We went through a course to broaden our knowledge and get even more tools regarding this field. An education that is available at Berghs. It is called "Insight-driven strategy work". Crazy fun. Really so fun." (Consultant 2)

One difference that emerges is how the teams handle training and other workshops. Some of them have organized internal trainings and workshops, while others rely on a more flexible and individual approach where each member gets a budget to choose from and attend trainings and conferences according to their own interests and needs. Some consultants explain;

> "We have something we call Tuesday scouting. So every week someone discovers something and then presents it to the others. And when we, if one of us goes to a lecture or something like that or a course, we always kind of have a requirement that we present it to the others as well. So it's like, it's part of it." (Consultant 2)

> "Once a month we have Fab Friday, which are different lunchtime lectures given by our employees. Everyone at the agency has the opportunity to present a topic with the aim of informing or educating about something that the company can benefit from. I think it's a lot of fun and really rewarding." (Consultant 7)

"...and then we work a lot trying to inspire each other and talk about things. And if there are new reports, we try to present them to everyone here at the agency. Like updates on current trends. The ones that are a bit more current for us, it's usually the Svenskarna och internet, it usually a big thing when it comes out during the fall. And the Ungdomsbarometern to some extent as well." (Consultant 5)

The conversations with the consultants reveal a diversity of approaches that reflect the flexible and dynamic nature of the advertising and communications industry. Their different approaches towards internal training promote a community of learning where each member actively contributes to the team's collective knowledge base (c.f. Whittington, 2001). By participating in and sharing insights from lectures, training courses and industry events, a continuous circulation of new knowledge and inspiration is created. From the practitioners' perspective within Strategy-as-Practice (Jarzabkowski, 2005), consults are recognized as the central driving force within strategy creation, underscoring the critical need to preserve knowledge and competence throughout these processes. This highlights that strategy processes within Strategy-as-Practice are fundamentally reliant on the involvement of practitioners.

Insight-driven work is often a product of several different aspects, where the consultants see their competence as a color palette with different shades of knowledge and expertise. This reflects a holistic view of competence development where theoretical insights are combined with practical experiences and constantly updated industry knowledge. Overall, the conversations with the consultants show that an insight-driven way of working is not limited to a single method or strategy but is rather seen as a dynamic and multifaceted process. The consultants' reasoning regarding the use of different approaches and academic theories versus how they performs in practice collides, as it is evident that the consultant receives inspiration from academic principles and transfer applicable activities into their practical methods. On the other hand, it is reasonable to recognize the insight-driven method as particular, but to claim that academic principles cannot be applied to practical cases is vague. Instead, the co-creation and connection between them should be recognized as the basis for further development and learning.

From the Strategy-as-Practice perspective (Whittington, 2003), collaboration between the different strategy fields within the agencies are highlighted. The participating consultants act as practitioners who are central components in strategy development, their approach and working methods represent practice and their various tactics and actions constitutes praxis,

which could also be seen as the tools used and the processes that brings strategies to life. This triad, practitioners, practices and practices, together form a framework which in turn can contain different clusters of co-creation. It can further be seen that it is within this triad that insights seamlessly have the opportunity to be integrated into strategic processes and strategic implementations. Sensemaking as a phenomenon is also a central aspect, which permeates every step and layer in the agencies' strategy processes. This iterative process shows how strategies are dynamic constructs that evolve in consultation with new insights and changing contexts.

The agency industry's commitment to using diverse competencies, fostering continuous learning and engaging in reflective meaning-making positions them in such a way that the strategies produced are both insightful and impactful. This multi-faceted approach among agencies ensures that their strategy work is not an isolated endeavor, but an evolving process deeply rooted in the nuanced understanding of the organization in question and its industry landscape.

5. Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate and understand the concept of insights from an agency perspective and its role within the framework of insight-driven communication. By examining how insights are generated, integrated and utilized to develop communication strategies, this research contributes new knowledge to strategy research within the communication industry. The study addressed the following research questions: *(1) How do communication consultants transform raw data into valuable insights within client projects? (2) What criteria do communication consultants use to identify the most valuable and appropriate insights to create communication activities within client projects?* and *(3) What is the significance of insights in guiding the planning and execution of communication activities within the agency industry?*. Through these questions, the study has provided a deeper understanding of how insight-driven communication can play a decisive role in strategic work in practice.

5.1. Discussion and Contribution

This research study has delved into the concept of insight-driven communication and emphasized the transformative role that insights play in the design of communication strategies. The result has shown that insight-driven work has a greater value than pure data analysis and is a multifaceted and complex communication process. The work processes, the production of insights, strategy formulation and the presence of the communication consultants in the interpretable and creative sphere is noticeably clear. Communication consultants are generally faced with the complex task of transforming large amounts of data into creative insights and messages, which should both be strategically useful and practically applicable, making the use of dynamic working methods, co-creativity and methodological flexibility highly valuable.

The study highlights several connected aspects within consultancy work, with particular focus on how insights are developed from raw data through continuous and co-creative process to its importance for strategy processes. Through the consultants and clients interacting and co-creating together, data is transformed into valuable insights that are based on a deeper understanding of both clients' goals and market dynamics. This interaction is of high importance when putting data into a meaningful context and thereby creating real value. Insight

development requires not only precision and creativity, but also a deep ability to read between the lines and understand the underlying meaning of the data. Hypothesis generation is a central part of this process, where the consultants explore and test different possibilities. These insights are often seen as sudden knowledge, where a deeper understanding of something that is not directly visible arises. The human factor, involving creative thinking and the ability to draw unexpected conclusions, is crucial in this transformation process.

The working methods of the consultants are characterized by flexibility and adaptability, where a big difference is made between quantitative or qualitative methods depending on the agency. The qualitative methods in particular are highlighted as important for being able to explore the underlying causes of trends and identify new path choices and challenges. The consultants work iteratively and use creative meetings to dynamically develop and refine insights. Despite the term's popularity, the consultants express a certain skepticism towards insight-driven communication, as the term "insight" sometimes is attributed as a shallow marketing tactic than as a genuine method for improving communication strategies. This skepticism underlines the importance of going beyond trend-sensitive concepts and focusing on concrete and practical utility. In order for insights to be valuable, they must deliver tangible results and offer real benefits in the form of improved communication and efficiency. The consultants emphasize the importance of validating insights through practical applications and real-world outcomes rather than simply following industry trends.

At the heart of insight development lies the collective intelligence within the teams, where each member's unique skills and perspectives contribute to a deeper, more comprehensive understanding. Through collaboration and the exchange of ideas, detailed insights are generated and refined at a higher level than individual analyzes could achieve. The insight work is based on a combination of social processes, pattern recognition, hypothesis generation and client involvement, factors that all play a crucial role in the transformation from data to insight with real meaning.

Secondly, one can certainly see the insight work involving a careful process of prioritization and ranking. This requires that consultants, whose backgrounds and experiences are highly relevant, possess the ability to determine which insights are most significant and relevant to the client projects. The consultants' individual skills and previous experiences significantly shape the direction of the strategies and communication efforts, as their different perspectives and expertise play a decisive role in how they interpret data and prioritize insights.

This influence is particularly evident in how the consultants process and interpret information. Rather than adhering to strict criteria for determining valuable insights from irrele-

vant ones, consultants rely on their unique experiences and professional backgrounds, which provide them with different interpretive frameworks and methodological tools. This diversity of perspectives allows them to assess and prioritize insights more effectively, leading to a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the data. The consultants' skills, which can vary from technical expertise to deep understanding of specific market segments, contributes to a richer and more contextualized interpretation of insights.

The practical approaches to prioritizing insights offer significant insight into the deeper understanding and methodologies consultants use to derive value from data. A key realization is that not all insights hold the same value. The work of ranking insights is a complex task that demands a thorough understanding of the client's needs and the context of the data. The consultants' diverse interpretive frameworks for processing and interpreting information, align with sensemaking theory, which views meaning making as a dynamic and evolving process (Weick et al., 2005).

It is evident that insights must not only be relevant but also impactful enough to influence strategy. While the trend towards insight-driven communication often suggests that anyone can generate insights, the consultants recognize that the true value of an insight depends on its relevance to production, the availability of time resources and the project's objectives. Despite the availability of extensive data, the importance of incorporating intuitive and emotional elements into the processes also becomes apparent. The phrase "data in itself is not enough to draw valuable insights" indicates that a personal and emotional connection to the work is crucial to fully grasp the meaning of the data. According to Weick (1995), this emotional dimension can deepen the understanding of the context in which the insights will be applied. The consultants' own experiences and emotional insights gives them a unique ability to understand and interpret data in a way that goes beyond pure quantitative analysis. This combined perspective of analytical and emotional understanding can therefore be seen as important for developing strategies and communication plans that are both effective and meaningful to clients.

Thirdly, a flexible and dynamic approach to transforming insights into strategic initiatives is highlighted. Rather than adhering to fixed frameworks or linear processes as advocated by Grünig and Kühn (2015), the consultants describe a circular and adaptive model that allows for continuous feedback and adjustments based on new insights. This approach aligns with the Strategy-as-Practice theory, which emphasizes the dynamic and processual nature of strategy (Whittington, 2003). By working "insight-driven" and integrating real-time feedback, the consultants are able to create more relevant and effective strategies.

One method that captures this process is the "meat grinder" metaphor, describing how data is processed into insights. This image conveys how collected information undergoes intensive creative processing to extract and transform valuable insights. The consultants emphasize the importance of not only collecting data, but also actively analyzing and interpreting it to generate actionable insights, reflecting Weick's (1995) focus on meaning-making and interpretation of information.

Moreover, the material underscores that these insights must be translated into concrete strategic measures. The consultants highlight that this translation is essential for the insights to impact the creative phase of the project. They use hypothesis-based approaches to guide the development of strategic initiatives, ensuring that insights are validated through the formulation and testing of hypotheses. This approach supports theories that emphasize the need for clearly formulated and communicated insights in order to be translated into practical decisions and actions (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009).

The consultants integrate internal working models with external theories to develop strategies that are both theoretically grounded and practically feasible. This approach reflects a balance between academic knowledge and practical application, where external frameworks are used to enhance and support their processes (Grunig, 1992). Although the consultants acknowledge that it is not feasible to apply theoretical frameworks to practical working conditions, their methods are still influenced by traditional principles, but from a modern point of view. The study highlights the dynamic interplay between traditional concepts and contemporary applications, suggesting a continued evolution and re-evaluation of established methodologies. Insights and insight-driven communication play an essential role in the creation of strategies and permeate all the phases of strategy creation, but like any strategic decision, the chosen approach must be tailored to fit the specific industry and organization.

In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of an iterative and adaptive methodology, where insights are integrated throughout the entire work process, influencing data analysis, method selection and strategy design. This suggest that insight development does not take place in isolation but occurs in close interaction with other aspects of the strategy work. In order to identify meaningful insights, a comprehensive and in-depth data analysis is required. Simultaneously, the choice of methods and strategies is shaped by the insights that emerge, which in turn requires a careful sorting and prioritization based on the specific needs and objectives of the project.

This complex interaction implies that no part of the process can function independently, instead, all components are interconnected and influence each other continuously. Therefore,

there is no universal template or simple method for navigating the process. Instead, the work requires an adaptive, learning-oriented approach where practical experience and ongoing reflection are central. Consultants must develop an ability to integrate data analysis, insights and strategy formulation in a cohesive manner. This methodological dynamic, reflected in the theory of Strategy-as-Practice (Whittington, 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2005), demonstrates how strategic processes are both flexible and iterative, with the consultants' active work roles and insights shaping strategies throughout the project life cycle.

By embracing this methodology, one can further develop a deeper understanding and be able to navigate in a constantly changing work environment. This approach fosters a more nuanced and robust methodology for strategic communication, recognizing that learning occurs alongside practical work, rather than solely through predetermined models. Thus, this study offers as an alternative view and a contribution to a more holistic view of strategy research, where the complex interaction between different parts of the process underlines the need for a dynamic and integrated insight methodology. By seeing insights as the primary driving force behind strategy work, the need for constant refinement and adaptation of strategies is highlighted, leading to more dynamic and successful communication strategies. Furthermore, this approach aligns with broader principles of strategic management, where informed decision-making is central. By placing insights at the very core of strategy work, the study offers a new perspective within the field of strategy research.

5.2. Limitations and Future Suggestions

This research study provides valuable insights into how communication consultants from various Swedish agencies comprehend and work with insight-driven communication within strategy processes. Through interviews, I have had the opportunity to explore the respondents' perspectives and experiences. However, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations of the study. The primary limitation concerns the sample size, as only nine communication agencies participated despite 26 communication agencies being invited. The low participation rate may primarily stem from consultants' hesitation to share company information, procedures and materials, driven by concerns that the information might be distributed outside the company. This mistrust is likely caused by the potential risk of competitors gaining access to the business's methods and approaches. Additionally, time constraints among consultants, who prioritize their client projects, may also contribute to the low participation rate.

The collected insights are also a reflection of the personal experiences and interpretations of the respondents regarding phenomena such as insight work and the development of communicative strategies. This indicates that the study is based on the consultants' own truths about the common reality. It is thus possible that other consultants from the same agencies may have different perceptions and opinions. To be able to study the subject in depth, a more comprehensive research is needed, encompassing a wider range of agencies and multiple perspectives.

Nevertheless, I believe that the study's empirical material offers a satisfactorily illustration of the creative work process and how to work with insight-driven communication in this context, representing a preliminary step towards further research. Based on the study´s limitations, several recommendations for future research can be proposed. Firstly, obtaining a larger sample size. Since qualitative research studies often aim to gain an in-depth understanding of people's individual experiences, perspectives and opinions, the research study will benefit from obtaining empirical material from an additional number of respondents and agencies, which enables a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject.

Secondly, combining observational methods with interviews from multiple respondents within the same agency could improve the comprehensiveness and reliability of the findings in regards of strategy formation and strategy processes.

Additionally, extending this type of research to other communicative professions beyond communication agencies would be beneficial. Exploring the integration of insights and strategy processes in other fields could reveal whether the concept of insight-driven methods is applicable beyond the agency industry and how it might influence other sectors in the future.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Informed Consent Form

I ……………………………………. voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I have had the purpose of the study explained to me. I understand that participation involves me answering questions about my workplace and internal structures where I will contribute with my opinions and experience of how we view the concept of insights and its importance for our strategy processes. I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research, but I will contribute with new knowledge to the field of strategic communication research.

I agree to my interview being recorded for the purpose of allowing the material to be transcribed afterwards. I understand that any information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially. I understand that my identity will remain anonymous if I wish for that. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity, the identity of my company or the identity of the people I am talking about. I understand that all the information that I provide and my signature will be saved until the research's examination day and that it will be deleted afterwards.

Signature of research participant

…………………………………...   ………………….
Signature of participant   Date

Signature of researcher
I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

…………………………………   …………………..
Signature of researcher   Date

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Categories	Interview Questions
Insight as a Concept	1. How do you define an insight? 2. What characteristics does an insight have? 3. Different types of insights can have different meanings, what is your opinion on that statement? 4. How are insights created and produced within your communications agency? 5. What different sources or methods do you use to generate insights? 6. How do you view the difference between data and insight? 7. How do you convert data into insights? 8. What does it mean to work insight-driven? 9. How long has your agency worked insight-driven? 10. How important are insights in your daily work and why? 11. How can insights contribute to an improved communication activity?
Insight-Driven Communication	1. What would you say is insight-driven communication? 2. Insight-driven communication has become a very popular concept among communication practitioners and other industries, what is your opinion on this subject? 3. Why does your agency believe that insight-driven communication is an important concept? 4. Do you involve your clients in the process of insight creation? 5. How do you involve your clients in the insight creation process? 6. Can you describe how you adapt your insights based on the preferences and behaviors of different target groups? 7. How does insight-driven communication affect your ability to differentiate your agency from other communication agencies? 8. What role do technology and data analysis play in your ability to generate and apply insights for communication projects? 9. Which specific mechanisms or processes are seen as the basis for effective insight-driven communication? 10. How to you measure or evaluate the importance of insight-driven communication in relation to strategic goals? 11. Are there any industry-specific trends or developments that affect the actual importance of insight-driven communication today? 12. How do you communicate your insights to your clients within your collaboration and creation processes?

Strategy Processes	1. What do your internal work processes look like from start to finish? 2. What does a client project look like from start to finish? 3. Can you explain how the insight creation processes looks like from start to finish? 4. Which steps are included in your strategy processes towards your clients? 5. Where in the process are the insights and how are they utilized in your projects? 6. Which work roles are involved in your client projects and why these in particular? 7. How do you consider and manage the unique needs and goals of different clients when designing your strategies and implementing them within your projects? 8. What methods or frameworks do you use to develop and implement strategies for different types of communication projects? 9. How do you consider market trends, industry changes and competitive analysis in your strategy process in regards of your clients? 10. Can you describe how you manage and solve any challenges or obstacles that arise during the implementation of your strategies and projects for your clients? 11. What is your opinion on the need for flexibility and adaptability in your various processes given the rapidly changing nature of audiences, technology and markets?
Integration of Insights into Strategy Processes	1. What significance do insights have for your work processes? 2. How do you work with insights in your daily work? 3. How are insights created between colleagues, what does the internal interaction look like? 4. Are there unwritten rules about how you work with insights within the projects or do you lean on different frameworks? 5. In what way do insights guide the communication processes? 6. How is insight-driven communication integrated into your strategy processes in order to achieve desired results towards clients? 7. How have you seen insights being integrated and used to shape communication activities in practice? 8. What challenges do you typically face when trying to integrate insights to your strategy processes and how do you deal with these challenges?

	9. How do you view the relationship between qualitative and quantitative insights?
	10. Can you share an example where insights have had a clear effect on the outcome of the communication project?
	11. Would you consider that there is a noticeable difference between when companies have based their strategies on insights and when they have not?
	12. How can organizations ensure that insights are continuously integrated and considered within strategy processes over time?
	13. Are there any recommendations you would give other communication practitioners to optimize their strategy processes with insights in mind?

Appendix 3: Coding Sheet

Themes	Categories	Codes
From Disorder to Clarity	Collaborative Hypothesis Development	Create and Explore Hypotheses
		Metaphors
		Find Patterns
		Client Involvement
		Co-Creation
		Social Processes
	Navigating Tensions	Read between the Lines
	The Art of Developing Insights	Human Factor
		Data Conversion
		Communication as a trend term
		Rhetorical Questions #1
		Insight as an aha experience
		Sensemaking
Insights as a Creative Springboard	Fostering Creativity for Effective Communication	Increased Creativity
		Driving Forces
		Inspiration
		Target Group Focus
		Symbolism
		Strategic Path Choices
		Insight-Driven
		The Effect Chain
		Unique Selling Point
		Different Models and

	Transforming Insights into Strategic Initiatives	Approaches
		Evidence
		Problem Solving
		Planning and Emergent Practice
Human Insight Compass	Emotional Intelligence in Creative Processes	Heart and Gut
		Rhetorical Questions #2
		Flexibility
		"The Human Being in focus"
		Value Creation
	"Learning by Doing"	Different Palettes of Knowledge
		Unwritten Rules
		Different views
		Educated in Different Ways
		Competition
		Challenges and Agile Working Methods