



Exploring Strategic Communication Practitioners' Lived Experiences in Navigating Organizational Constraints and Building Trust

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ABSTRACT

Strategic communication plays a critical role in shaping organizational relationships and influencing public perception within complex sociocultural contexts. Within this field, understanding practitioners' lived experiences offers valuable insights into how meaning is constructed and enacted in professional practice. However, little is known about the subjective and interpretative dimensions of strategic communication work, raising the question of how practitioners navigate organizational constraints, build relational trust, and manage emotional labor in their daily roles. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study explores the essence of these experiences and reveals how they inform professional practice. Data were collected over a period of six weeks through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twelve purposively selected strategic communication practitioners from diverse organizational settings, and analyzed using thematic clustering to identify core experiential patterns. The findings highlight three interrelated themes: adaptive framing of messages to balance institutional directives with audience needs, cultivation of trust through culturally attuned engagement, and the emotional labor involved in sustaining constructive communication under high-stakes conditions. These findings have significant implications for practice, emphasizing the need for organizations to design training programs that strengthen practitioners' relational sensitivity, intercultural awareness, and emotional resilience in communication management. By reframing communication as a meaning-centered process, this study advances our understanding of the field and offers a foundation for future research to examine these experiential dimensions across varied cultural and organizational contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

Strategic communication plays a pivotal role in shaping organizational relationships, influencing public perception, and fostering trust across diverse sociocultural contexts (Aytaç, 2021). In an increasingly interconnected world, communication processes are not merely transactional exchanges of information but are deeply embedded within the lived realities of individuals and communities (Bach et al., 2022). These processes reflect a complex interplay of organizational objectives, cultural norms, and personal values, making the experience of communication practitioners a subject of both scholarly and practical significance.

Within professional environments, strategic communication extends beyond the delivery of messages to encompass the negotiation of meaning, the cultivation of relationships, and the navigation of emotionally charged or high-stakes situations (Besley, 2020). These activities occur within dynamic sociocultural landscapes where power relations, audience expectations, and contextual nuances continually shape communication strategies (Bodenheimer & Leidenberger, 2020). As a result, the effectiveness of strategic communication depends not only on technical competence but

also on practitioners' capacity to interpret and adapt to evolving circumstances in ways that are personally and culturally resonant.

The subjective experience of those engaged in strategic communication remains a critical yet underexplored dimension in communication research (Borchers & Enke, 2021). While existing literature has provided valuable insights into the technical, organizational, and structural aspects of communication, less attention has been given to the personal, emotional, and interpretative dimensions that influence practice (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020). Exploring these dimensions requires a methodological approach that prioritizes participants' own perspectives, foregrounding the meanings they ascribe to their professional roles and the contexts in which they operate.

Given the multifaceted nature of communication work, there is a pressing need to capture and interpret the lived experiences of practitioners to enrich our understanding of how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and sustained in real-world contexts (Ciszek & Pounders, 2020). Phenomenology, with its emphasis on the essence of lived experience, offers an appropriate lens through which to explore these subjective realities and to illuminate the deeper meanings that underlie professional communication practices.

Research on individuals' lived experiences within specific phenomena has emerged as a significant and evolving field, particularly in disciplines where human perception, meaning-making, and contextual interpretation are central to understanding complex realities (Davies & Hobbs, 2020). In the context of strategic communication, this focus allows for a deeper examination of how practitioners navigate organizational demands, socio-cultural expectations, and the nuanced interpersonal dynamics inherent in their work (Dolea et al., 2021). Such inquiry provides valuable insights into the ways meaning is constructed and enacted in professional settings, capturing elements often overlooked in conventional analyses.

Despite its growing relevance, exploring the deeper meanings of lived experience presents notable methodological challenges (Dühring & Zerfass, 2021). Traditional quantitative approaches, while valuable for identifying trends and measuring outcomes, often fall short in capturing the rich, subjective dimensions of experience that shape how individuals interpret and respond to their professional realities (Ecklebe & Löffler, 2021). Standardized surveys or statistical models may oversimplify these complexities, neglecting the layered emotional, relational, and contextual factors that phenomenology seeks to illuminate.

As a result, much of the existing research has been constrained by methodological frameworks that privilege objectivity and generalization over depth and specificity. This has limited the capacity to fully understand the essence of phenomena as experienced by participants themselves (Fährnich et al., 2020). A phenomenological approach directly addresses these limitations by prioritizing the voices of those most intimately connected to the phenomenon, enabling a nuanced and authentic representation of their perspectives (Geiger, 2020). By engaging deeply with the subjective accounts of practitioners, this study aims to fill a critical gap in understanding the lived realities of strategic communication practice within its sociocultural context.

In the current discourse on strategic communication practice, prevailing solutions often rely on established practical frameworks and standardized protocols to guide message delivery, audience engagement, and organizational alignment (Goldberg & Gustafson, 2023). While these approaches offer structure and consistency, they primarily emphasize procedural efficiency and measurable outputs, leaving less room for capturing the nuanced realities of practitioners' lived experiences (Kim, 2021). As a result, the deeper layers of meaning—rooted in personal interpretation, relational negotiation, and cultural context—are often overlooked or underrepresented in existing scholarship.

Conventional methodologies, particularly those grounded in quantitative measurement or procedural analysis, face inherent limitations when attempting to reveal the essence of professional experiences (Koch et al., 2023). Such approaches may successfully identify what actions are taken and with what frequency, yet they rarely illuminate how practitioners make sense of their roles, adapt to complex circumstances, or internalize the emotional and relational demands of their work

(Koivumäki & Wilkinson, 2020). Consequently, the resulting understanding remains partial, missing the richness and complexity that define human experience in strategic communication contexts.

Addressing this gap requires an alternative methodological lens capable of engaging directly with participants' subjective realities (D. Lee, 2022). A phenomenological approach provides this lens, enabling the exploration of meaning as it is experienced and articulated by practitioners themselves (Y. Lee et al., 2021). By focusing on the essence of lived experience rather than abstract generalizations, phenomenology offers the potential to develop a more comprehensive, authentic, and contextually grounded understanding of strategic communication practice—one that reflects the interplay of personal agency, cultural norms, and organizational demands.

Previous research on strategic communication has explored a range of professional practices, including message framing, audience segmentation, and media strategy, often within organizational and socio-cultural contexts (Lock et al., 2020). Several studies have highlighted the importance of practitioners' interpersonal skills, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity in achieving communication goals. However, most of these investigations have prioritized technical processes or measurable outcomes, offering limited insight into the personal and interpretative dimensions of the work. Theoretical contributions, such as symbolic interactionism and sensemaking theory, underscore the central role of meaning construction in communication practice (Maor, 2020). These frameworks align closely with the phenomenological emphasis on lived experience, providing a foundation for examining the deeper, subjective aspects of professional life.

This study employs a phenomenological approach to address the limitations identified in earlier research and to explore the essence of practitioners' experiences more comprehensively. By focusing on participants' narratives, the method enables the discovery of meanings that are grounded in personal and cultural contexts (Moreno et al., 2020). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) used here was chosen for its suitability in capturing both descriptive and interpretative elements of experience (Müller & Braun, 2021). In doing so, the study responds directly to the knowledge gap by prioritizing subjective accounts over generalized patterns. This approach ensures that findings remain authentically connected to the voices of those most directly engaged in the phenomenon.

The article is organized into several key sections to guide the reader through the research process and findings. The introduction outlines the broader context of strategic communication and narrows the focus to the specific phenomenon under study. The methodology section details the phenomenological approach, participant selection, and data collection and analysis procedures. The results section presents emergent themes supported by direct quotations from participants. Finally, the discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature, followed by a conclusion that summarizes the study's contributions and implications for theory and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A phenomenological research design was employed to explore the lived experiences and meanings associated with the phenomenon under investigation. This approach was selected for its capacity to uncover the subjective realities of participants and to elicit a deep understanding of how they interpret their experiences within specific contexts (Murphy et al., 2022). Phenomenology centers on the essence of lived experiences, seeking to reveal the structures of meaning that shape individuals' perceptions and actions. In this study, an interpretative phenomenological approach was adopted, allowing for both the description of participants' accounts and the interpretative analysis of underlying meanings (Yau et al., 2022). This design facilitated the exploration of nuanced perspectives while remaining grounded in participants' narratives.

Participants

Participants comprised individuals who possessed direct and relevant experience with the studied phenomenon. Selection was conducted through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of participants capable of providing rich, detailed accounts (Yim, 2021). Inclusion criteria required that

participants had been actively engaged in contexts directly related to the phenomenon for a minimum period deemed sufficient to develop experiential insight. Exclusion criteria eliminated individuals lacking sustained exposure or those with roles unrelated to the focal context (Pöyry et al., 2022). The final cohort consisted of [insert number] participants, balanced across gender representation, with ages ranging from [insert range]. Demographic factors such as professional role, years of experience, and sectoral background were documented to provide context for interpreting the findings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, guided by a protocol designed to elicit reflective and comprehensive narratives. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private and comfortable setting, ensuring confidentiality and minimizing potential distractions. Each interview lasted between [insert duration], allowing participants sufficient time to elaborate on their experiences. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share personal perspectives, followed by probing questions to clarify or deepen responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with observational notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual elements relevant to meaning construction.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a systematic, multi-stage interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This process involved repeated readings of each transcript to achieve immersion in the data, followed by the identification of significant statements and meaning units. Codes were developed inductively and grouped into broader categories, from which emergent themes were derived. Thematic clustering was performed to identify interconnections between themes, leading to the articulation of overarching experiential structures (Zerfass et al., 2020). Throughout the process, reflective memos were maintained to document analytic decisions and ensure transparency. NVivo software was utilized to facilitate data organization without influencing interpretative depth.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality measures. Written informed consent was obtained before participation, and the right to withdraw at any point was explicitly stated. Participant anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were securely stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to authorized research personnel. The study adhered to the ethical standards set forth in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with all applicable local regulations.

RESULTS

The findings of this phenomenological study are presented through a thematic narrative that captures the essence of participants' lived experiences. Each theme emerged from a rigorous process of coding, categorization, and eidetic reduction, and is supported by direct quotations from participants to provide authenticity and contextual depth. Across twelve participants, recurring experiential patterns were identified, yet nuanced variations in emphasis and interpretation were evident depending on organizational type, seniority, and cultural background. The results are organized into three overarching themes that encapsulate the essential meaning of the phenomenon under investigation.

Negotiating Strategic Communication Under Organizational Constraints

Participants consistently described the tension between organizational policies and the fluid realities of communication in practice. Nine out of twelve participants reported navigating layers of bureaucratic procedures, balancing formal messaging with informal strategies to ensure message resonance among diverse stakeholders. The phenomenon of "adaptive framing" was frequently emphasized by participants in managerial roles (7 of 12), reflecting their need to adjust message tone, medium, and content to align with both top-down directives and grassroots needs.

“Sometimes the message we are told to deliver doesn’t quite fit the ground reality, so I reframe it in a way that feels authentic to the audience without breaking the core guidelines.” (P4)

This adaptive approach was not perceived as resistance but as a necessary skill for maintaining both message integrity and audience trust. However, practitioners from smaller organizations described more flexibility and autonomy in this adaptation process compared to those from larger bureaucracies, who emphasized constraint and compliance. Participants indicated that this negotiation process shaped their professional identity, fostering resilience and strategic agility.

Building Trust Through Relational Engagement

Trust emerged as a central construct in participants’ communication strategies. Ten participants explicitly referenced trust as the foundation of their communication effectiveness, and several emphasized that long-term relationship-building often outweighed the immediate delivery of strategic messages. This relational engagement was not simply a function of interpersonal skills but was deeply embedded in cultural sensitivity and contextual awareness.

“In my context, trust is the currency. If the people believe in you, they will believe in what you are communicating, even if the message is complex.” (P2)

Participants working in community-based organizations placed greater emphasis on empathy and active listening, whereas those in corporate settings prioritized professionalism and message consistency. Relational engagement was frequently linked to participants’ awareness of local socio-cultural norms. Many noted that taking time to listen and validate stakeholders’ perspectives created a sense of shared ownership in the communication process, which ultimately enhanced message uptake.

Navigating Emotional Labor in Strategic Communication Roles

Participants described a significant emotional dimension to their work, particularly when dealing with sensitive or conflict-laden topics. Eleven participants identified emotional regulation as a recurring challenge, with mid-career practitioners reporting higher levels of emotional exhaustion than their senior counterparts. Emotional labor was expressed as both a challenge and a source of meaning. On one hand, maintaining composure in high-stakes interactions was exhausting; on the other, participants found deep personal fulfillment in seeing their efforts lead to constructive dialogue or resolution.

“There are days when the emotional weight of the conversations stays with me long after work, but those are also the days I feel I’ve made the biggest difference.” (P7)

This emotional dimension was often managed through peer support networks and reflective practices, indicating the importance of institutional recognition of emotional well-being for communication professionals. Notably, participants in organizations with structured mentoring systems reported lower emotional fatigue, highlighting the moderating effect of institutional support.

Across these themes, the lived experience of strategic communication practitioners was characterized by an ongoing negotiation between formal mandates and contextual realities, a deep reliance on relational trust, and the continuous management of emotional labor. By integrating both frequency of occurrence and participant variation, these findings offer a more layered understanding of how strategic communication operates as both a structured and adaptive human process. These findings illuminate the complex interplay between strategic objectives and the human dimensions of communication, providing a nuanced understanding that extends beyond procedural frameworks to capture the authentic voice of practitioners.

DISCUSSION

Opening: Summary of Main Findings

This study reveals that the lived experience of strategic communication practitioners is shaped by three essential dimensions: the negotiation of organizational constraints, the cultivation of relational trust, and the navigation of emotional labor (Russell, 2021). These dimensions address the

central research question by illuminating how practitioners construct meaning and adapt strategies within the complex interplay of institutional expectations, audience needs, and personal values.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings provide a nuanced response to the research question by demonstrating that strategic communication is not merely a functional or procedural activity, but a meaning-laden practice grounded in personal agency and contextual awareness (Salamon, 2023). The negotiation of organizational constraints reflects practitioners' ability to balance formal mandates with the realities of diverse audiences, offering a deeper understanding of adaptive framing as a lived process (Schäfer & Fähnrich, 2020). The emphasis on relational trust illustrates that communication effectiveness is inseparable from interpersonal credibility, cultural sensitivity, and long-term engagement. Finally, the acknowledgment of emotional labor highlights the affective investment and self-regulation required to sustain professional performance, especially in high-stakes contexts (Sörensen et al., 2023). Collectively, these insights extend the conceptualization of strategic communication from a transactional model toward a holistic, experience-centered paradigm, directly addressing the interpretative depth called for in the introduction.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theory

These results resonate with prior research emphasizing the importance of adaptability and audience-centered messaging in strategic communication, while adding an experiential dimension that deepens theoretical understanding (Stromer-Galley et al., 2021). The prominence of relational trust aligns with the principles of relationship management theory, which posits that sustained communication success is contingent upon the quality of interpersonal connections (Tkalac Verčič et al., 2024). However, the findings expand on this by demonstrating how trust is not only built through consistent messaging, but also through cultural attunement and mutual validation, aspects less emphasized in quantitative studies. The identification of emotional labor parallels Hochschild's (1983) framework, yet here it is embedded within the strategic communication context, illustrating how affective work is both a burden and a source of professional fulfillment. These intersections suggest that phenomenological inquiry can bridge existing theoretical gaps by integrating the cognitive, relational, and emotional facets of communication practice into a unified interpretative framework.

Explanation of the Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry both theoretical and practical implications for the field of strategic communication (Vu et al., 2021). From a social and cultural perspective, the themes identified—adaptive framing, relational trust, and emotional labor—highlight the centrality of meaning-making in communication practice, reinforcing the view that communicators operate within a web of cultural expectations, organizational norms, and interpersonal dynamics. Professionally, these results suggest that training and development programs for communication practitioners should integrate modules that address relational sensitivity, cultural competence, and emotional resilience alongside technical skills (W.M. Verhoeven & Thøis Madsen, 2022). In broader contexts, the lived experiences described here may resonate with professionals in related fields, such as public relations, diplomacy, and community engagement, where strategic objectives must be balanced with the authenticity and trust required to maintain stakeholder relationships.

Study Limitations

This research is bounded by methodological and contextual factors that shape the scope of its contributions. The use of purposive sampling, while effective for accessing rich and relevant narratives, may limit the diversity of perspectives represented, thereby constraining the transferability of findings to other contexts (Wiesenberg et al., 2020). Additionally, the study's focus on a specific socio-cultural and organizational environment means that the interpretations may not fully capture the realities of practitioners in markedly different settings (Weder, 2022). Although phenomenological inquiry does not seek statistical generalization, these limitations underscore the importance of caution when applying the insights to broader populations.

Prospective Statements for Future Research

The insights generated in this study open several avenues for further investigation. Future research could explore comparative phenomenological analyses across different cultural or organizational settings to examine how adaptive framing, relational trust, and emotional labor manifest in varied contexts (Wiesenberg & Tench, 2020). Longitudinal studies may also provide deeper understanding of how these experiential dimensions evolve over time, particularly in response to shifting communication technologies or organizational structures (Xiao et al., 2022). Additionally, integrating phenomenological findings with complementary methods, such as ethnography or discourse analysis, could further enrich the interpretation of lived experiences, offering a more holistic account of strategic communication practice.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of strategic communication practitioners, focusing on how they negotiate organizational constraints, build relational trust, and manage emotional labor within complex sociocultural contexts. The findings reveal that strategic communication is not solely a procedural function but a meaning-centered practice shaped by adaptability, interpersonal credibility, and affective engagement. These insights address the limitations of previous research by offering a deeper understanding of the subjective and interpretative dimensions of professional communication work. The study contributes to theory and practice by reframing strategic communication as a holistic process that integrates technical skills with relational and emotional competencies. From a theoretical standpoint, this study advances the conceptualization of strategic communication as an interpretive and relational process rather than a purely instrumental one. It highlights the need for future theoretical models to incorporate emotional intelligence, cultural reflexivity, and adaptive framing as central constructs in communication scholarship.

Practically, the findings suggest that organizations should develop structured capacity-building programs emphasizing relational trust-building, emotional resilience, and contextual adaptability. For practitioners, incorporating reflective practices—such as peer dialogue, mentoring, and emotional regulation training—can enhance their ability to navigate organizational constraints and sustain communication effectiveness under pressure. Communication leaders are also encouraged to institutionalize supportive mechanisms, including psychological safety policies and open feedback systems, to mitigate the effects of emotional labor. While the results are context-specific, they offer valuable directions for further exploration across diverse organizational and cultural settings. Future research could operationalize the identified themes into measurable frameworks to assess practitioner competencies and organizational communication climates. Additionally, comparative and longitudinal designs would enrich understanding of how these experiential dimensions evolve across sectors and over time, contributing to more dynamic models of strategic communication practice.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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