

# The limited role of African strategic communication practitioners in ethical communication practices

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study answers the call for research and theorising exploring ethical communication and brand risk from the African continent. The study's purpose was to identify the challenges that strategic communication practitioners face in enacting ethical crisis communication in South Africa.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The researchers conducted ten in-depth interviews with South African strategic communication professionals.

**Findings** – The dominant theme emerging from the study is the marginalisation and exclusion of the communication function in decision-making during crisis situations. Communicators were viewed as implementers, technicians and not strategic counsel. The protection of organisational reputation was done at the expense of the ethics and moral conscience of practitioners. Practitioners were viewed and deployed as spin doctors and tools to face unwanted media interactions.

**Originality/value** – The article sheds light on the concepts of ethical communication and decision-making in a multicultural African context using the moral theory of Ubuntu and strategic communication. It demonstrates the tension professionals experience as they toggle between unethical capitalist approaches and African values. The practitioner's role as organisational moral conscience is hindered, suppressed and undermined by organisational leadership's directives to use opaque, complex communication, selective transparency and misrepresentation of facts.

**Keywords** Strategic communication, Ethical communication, Brand reputation, Crisis, Decision-making, Ubuntu

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The strategic communication practitioner's (SCP's) role as an ethical, moral compass is catalysing discourse and renewed interest (Benecke, 2019; Bowen, 2016; Jackson and Moloney, 2019; Jin *et al.*, 2018). This interest is emerging as the field of strategic communication is put into disrepute by prominent unethical practices in Sub-Saharan Africa that are attracting criticism and self-introspection. Ngonyo (2017) paints a picture of Kenyan SCPs willing to pay journalists bribes to kill a damaging story, get favourable organisational coverage and knowingly disseminating false information at the instruction of their superiors. Inginge-koko and Wagbara (2019) describe systemic and institutionalised corruption in the Public Relations Department of the Nigerian Police. In terms of the context for this study, notable examples include the 2017 political and racial tensions in South Africa fomented by defunct UK based public relations firm Bell Pottinger that got placed under administration for its unethical White Monopoly Capital campaign (Nhedzi and Gombarume, 2021). To date



Germany software company SAP and McKinsey and Company were cumulatively ordered to repay US \$86 million for fraudulent conduct at state owned enterprises in South Africa. The Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa described it as the emergence of an ethical deficit and called for regulating the industry. These examples raise the question of whether SCPs can still realise and fulfil their duty ethically. A defining responsibility of an SCP is to make decisions for brands and organisations in different settings. These decisions involve more than creating a communication strategy or appropriate communication for organisations.

Conceptually, strategic communication evolved from a military context; however, current conceptualisation in the past two decades has expanded the concept within non-military organisations (Van Ruler, 2021). Strategic communication is a unified umbrella field inclusive of organisational communication, corporate communication, marketing communication, public relations and health communication. It also covers risk communication, (ethical) crisis communication and issues management (Botan, 2018, p. i). Van Ruler (2021), a key scholar of the field, concludes that “strategic communication is about communication, in the context of organisational strategy development and its implementation”. Botan (2018, pp. 8–9) adds that strategic communication is “the use of strategic information as input in communication planning”. However, the intent behind the application and use of strategic communication during a crisis is a grey area susceptible to unethical brand conduct.

### 1.1 Ethics

Ethics should be an inherent and inseparable part of crisis communication. Ethics are rooted in the virtues of trustworthiness, accountability and transparent communication that is truthful, equitable and respects an individual’s rights to privacy. Palenchar and Heath (2006) define ethics as the scholarship around various degrees of fairness, justice and morality. The terms morals and values are sometimes used interchangeably because ethical questions enquire about morality and what should be valued (Grunig, 2014). Strategic communication that lacks criticality frames it as an ethical obligation to benefit the organisation to minimise reputational harm and respect organisational values and preferences. This narrow organisation-centric viewpoint emphasises the primacy of the organisation’s “purpose to fulfil its mission” (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015) even at the expense of the SCP. This previously mentioned grey area manifests as a chasm between stated values and purpose statements that are not lived when they threaten brand survival. In other words, such organisations practice purpose and values’ washing that ultimately leads to ethical failures. Calls for a more critical view beyond a focus on the organisation’s interests have been made by critical theorists (Benecke, 2019). Benecke (2019, p. 101) argues that “most normative Western Public Relations models are irrelevant to African practice but identified, amongst others, a strong activist approach followed” by African practitioners. For relevance ethical communication roles should be professional and responsive to contextual intelligence demands.

The ethical ‘moral compass’ has become a buzzword in the strategic communication literature and practice (Nhedzi and Gombarume, 2021; Jin *et al.*, 2018). A ‘moral compass’ refers to “an ethical framework, which helps manage organisational values and analyse ethical decisions by integrating the knowledge of the public gathered through boundary spanning activities” (Nhedzi and Gombarume, 2021, p. 30).

Researchers concur that information density facilitated by digital technology and daily communication amongst brands and stakeholders increases the risk of a crisis event and damage to a brand’s reputation, and ethical communication should be prioritised for SCPs (Surdut *et al.*, 2021). Brands run into crisis situations for various reasons. A crisis is an inflexion point with an impact on the perceptions about an unpredictable event that threatens important stakeholder expectations. These events or vulnerabilities include health and safety, economic and environmental issues, customer experience failures, operational and

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capacity events which can impact an organisation's reputation, performance and generate brand risk dependent on severity (Coombs, 2015; Nhedzi and Gombarume, 2021).

### 1.2 Brand risk

The focus of our study on brands is consistent with research emphasising the omnipresence of brands in people's daily lives (Nhedzi, 2020). Risk involves the likelihood of the occurrence of an undesirable situation, event or condition (Ndlela, 2019). Beck (2009, p. 9) suggests that "risks are always future events that may occur, that threaten" brands. Brand risk denotes the possible damage to a brand's overall standing originating from negative signals regarding the brand. Two components to the notion of risk are first, uncertainty of an outcome, and second, the importance of negative consequences associated with the outcome of a choice (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). Brand risk can negatively affect earnings, market share and shareholder value, generate negative earned media and attract litigation. Similarly certain crisis communication strategies can expose brands to ethical and reputational risk. Reputation is a corporate asset that is difficult to protect because it is based on subjective impressions and expectations about an organisation (Volk *et al.*, 2017). Reputational events present as brand risks that can lead to brand annihilation. This risk is why some SCPs view deceptive mitigation as a matter of life and death. Crisis management capabilities are an integral part of brand's risk management and business continuity strategies (Ndlela, 2019).

### 1.3 Ethical communication

Specific domains have professional guidelines that outline ethical behaviour (Surdu *et al.*, 2021). For example, various discourses take place about public relation's code of ethics. The same applies to journalists. Ideally communication should be established on brand specific values, inclusive of candour, precision and the accountability of SCPs in practice. Ethical communication can therefore be defined as "a framework or set of acceptable communication principles that align with an enterprise's overarching code of conduct or code of ethics" (Mandelbaum, 2021, p. 1). Ethical communication during a crisis is not easy for practitioners. Widespread misconstructions and misconceptions surround ethics, values and morals (Botan, 2018). Moral agency's duality incorporates SCPs as professionals involved in ethical communication by their professional conduct and moral communication practices that display organisational core values and principles.

Many studies expose what SCPs state; they enact in their roles; however, insights into what practitioners actually do in practice are lacking (Heide *et al.*, 2018). The interconnected complex global context impacted by swift technological developments makes it difficult to emphasise morals, ethics and values in strategic communication practice (Heide *et al.*, 2018).

This study answers the call from strategic communication scholars (Bowen, 2008, 2016) for research that explores risk and crisis communication in developing regions like Africa (Brunner, 2017). The article examines SCPs' perspectives of ethical issues with regard to decision-making during crisis communication. It also illuminates the challenges faced by SCPs in enacting ethical crisis communication and how they are overcoming those barriers. Fundamentally, we follow the main aim of the decision-making role that SCPs play during ethical crisis communication.

Specific research questions (RQs) include the following:

- RQ1. What challenges are faced by strategic communication professionals in enacting ethical crisis communication in South Africa?
- RQ2. Which decision-making role does strategic communication professionals assume during ethical crisis communication in South Africa?
- RQ3. How are strategic communication professionals assessing their ethical communication efforts in South Africa, if at all?

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## 2. Theoretical framework and literature review

The theoretical underpinning for this study is founded on the use of strategic communication and the African moral theory of Ubuntu to explore the concepts of ethical communication with special reference to communitarian ethics as an alternative to western individualistic points of view and the decision-making role of SCPs in multicultural contexts such as South Africa. The literature review then examines the SCP in relation to the moral compass concept, integrity, the conflict between principles and role-based identity.

### 2.1 Ethical communication

Ethics in crisis communication lacks specific theories (Kim, 2015). Cribb (2019, p. 22) argues that “almost anything could be turned into a set of live ethical issues and given that these are very unlikely to be explicitly answered to everyone’s satisfaction such potential uncertainty needs to be managed.” Therefore, applying the ethical communication theory to strategic communication remains vague. Furthermore, ethical methodologies, theories and viewpoints are inherently contested and rooted in Western ideals.

Within strategic communication, practitioners must exhibit competency in research, decision-making and problem-solving. Tactical strategic communication managers make routine decisions daily on specific issues. Alternatively, strategic managers are concerned with management, corporate structure, policies, issues and trends. In response to ambiguity, leading organisations are also transforming into more responsive, open, less static, bureaucratic and hierarchical entities (Van Ruler, 2021). This implies brand behaviours should be transparent and principled and should demonstrate good intentions towards all stakeholders (Bowen *et al.*, 2016). However, in multicultural settings such as South Africa and many parts of Africa as illustrated in the introduction, graft and greed are counter to communitarian ethical mores embedded in Ubuntu theory.

### 2.2 Communitarian ethics

In contrast to the western view of individualism (West, 2014), Metz (2012, p. 391) suggests the explanation of the nature of communitarian ethics. With this lens, evaluations of misbehaviour are framed around *Ubuntu in Nguni*, *Botho in Sesotho*, *hunhu* in Shona – these terms denote humanness (Metz, 2012). Cognate concepts to Ubuntu express the notion that a “person is a person through other persons” for instance in Sesotho ‘*Motho ke motho ka batho babang*’ (Metz, 2012, p. 391). The use of such values and morality captures a normative account of what people “value in life, namely personhood, selfhood, and humanness, in characteristic Southern African languages and thoughts as value-laden concepts” (Metz, 2012).

SCPs are currently at an inflexion point where emerging moral socio-techno realities and the need to redefine their roles collide. It implies redefining roles and acting virtuously based on having a conception of good, personal values on what they identify with and work towards (Verwey *et al.*, 2017). The literature claims that SCPs are increasingly subjected to ‘individual relativism’ (Verwey and Muir, 2018). Individual relativism involves establishing personal moral reference points using consistent balancing of their position with organisation requirements, contracted duties and accountability (Verwey and Muir, 2018). The boundary lines are often blurry for SCPs. Besides individual relativism, individuals can adopt absolutism for ethical decision-making (Han *et al.*, 2013). Relativists refute a universal and absolute ethical principles perspective and utilise “ethical standards” based on their “socialisation, culture, and prevailing societal structures”, while “absolutists consistently apply ideal standards when they make moral judgements” (Han *et al.*, 2013, p. 557). Ethical guidelines cannot be implemented universally, leaving practitioners with contexts and environments that are messy, unclear and undefined (Holtzhausen, 2015). Hence, moral

judgements can be obstructed by relativism, while absolutism can escalate tension. The existence of the degree of moral status best describes the enforced compromises amongst “the urgent interests of different beings” (Metz, 2012, p. 389).

### 2.3 Moral compass and integrity

Ethical communication in and out of a crisis denotes ethicality and its principles that espouse exactitude and candour (Surdu *et al.*, 2021). Most scholars agree that SCPs must be ethically moral (Bowen, 2018). As a moral compass, SCPs must have regular access to the chief executive officer (CEO) in an advisory or counselling position (Bowen *et al.*, 2016). At the top level, practitioners are involved in ethics and implement ethical decision-making; however, this at times creates an ethical dilemma between competing interests and loyalties (Bowen *et al.*, 2016). For instance, culturally, Africans strongly identify with group loyalty, communalism, mutuality, social cohesion and social responsibility as demonstrated by Ubuntu. These values if adhered to can become an internal check around appropriate responses within and without the organisation. However, organisational responsibility is at times at odds with these culturally instituted norms and mores that clash with organisationally sanctioned unethical behaviour during a crisis. It creates tension between the SCP's values and obligations to an organisation. To successfully manage the tension between industry-oriented, personal and organisational values and ethics create dilemmas for SCPs (De Aurago and Beal, 2013).

### 2.4 Role-based identity

Ruck (2015) highlights the absence of literature on the ethical role of internal communicators. Regardless of whether communication is created by client or agency linked SCPs, it must be well timed, with pertinent content, consistent communication and encourage employee voices (Ruck, 2015). Within the internal context, SCPs face all kinds of problems, including low visibility, opposition from critics and insufficient support from funding sources (Ronald and Smith, 2008). Despite these trials, there is a need for an ethical internal communication approach that challenges management's (Ruck, 2015) decision-making and strives to inculcate moral sensitivity and moral reasoning in decision-making. Neill and Bowen (2021) claim that moral sensitivity must be present for ethical decision-making to occur. “Moral sensitivity involves an awareness of the impact of the decisions on the interests of others and can result in emotions such as empathy or sympathy” (Neill and Bowen, 2021). “Moral failures in management decision making” are not due to “weak moral development, a failure of moral character, or lack of understanding of what is right or wrong, but rather a setting aside of moral considerations in the pace of business activities” (Werhane, 1999, p. 11).

## 3. Method

The research applies the qualitative technique for an in-depth investigation of the challenges faced by SCPs in enacting ethical crisis communication. The study includes South African public and private sector organisations. To uncover professional practices in ethical communication issues during a crisis in South Africa, participants were required to have experience in the strategic communication industry and deal with an organisational crisis in the last five years. To accommodate the fact that SCPs do not exclusively work for an agency or a client, participants were recruited from both contexts. The experience of professional's ranged from 6 to 24 years. On average crisis management experience for the professionals was 10.4 years. Ten participants (seven female and three male) were recruited from July 2020 to October 2020, using purposive and snowball (or referral-chain) sampling strategies (Parker *et al.*, 2020). Participants' confidentiality was ensured, and informed consent was secured. The study has ethical clearance. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms are used given the potentially sensitive nature of the

results. In-depth interview questions were carried out on the topic of ethical crisis communication practices.

Data were collected using ten in-depth interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes via digital channels to enable social distancing protocols. The interviews explored communication practices related to leadership, decision-making and the SCP's role as a moral compass. Participants related their experiences regarding ethical issues and interactions with superiors and colleagues, and the challenges and responsibilities related to encounters with external stakeholders serving as the sample, out of 80 pages of raw manuscripts. Interview transcripts and one of the researcher's notes provided the raw data for thematic analysis using Atlas.Ti software. Subject experts were asked to review the instrument during a pilot study. Peer scrutiny of the research project was utilised to receive feedback offered at an international conference presentation. After data reduction, each theme was qualitatively analysed further to identify additional insights that were discussed and agreed upon prior to writing the findings. In establishing rapport, tactics to help ensure honesty in informants was used as each person who was approached was given an opportunity to refuse to participate in this study and ensured the credibility, dependability and trustworthiness of findings that [Lincoln and Guba \(1985\)](#), [Shenton \(2004\)](#) and others cite as critical criteria for valid qualitative research.

#### 4. Results

For many of the study participants, during a crisis, enacting ethical crisis communication was challenging. Participants describe facing criticism from executive leadership and legal professionals whilst trying to apply their ethical values during a crisis. In some instances, SCPs report a conflict between the application of personal principles and the desire to impress management at the expense of being ethical. Additionally, the SCPs vary in their descriptions of their role as the organisational conscience or moral compass. The proceeding discussion centres around four themes: (1) communication opaqueness and selective transparency, (2) strategic differences between practitioners and executive leadership during a crisis, (3) the delimited role as a communication technician or tactician without a seat in the boardroom and (4) management's marginalisation of the SCP's values in crisis decision-making.

##### *4.1 Communication opaqueness and selective transparency*

SCPs working in Public Relations (PR) consultancies described having clients who were conscious but wary of the risk transparency creates. Public Relations refers to "the management of communication between an organisation and its publics" ([Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 6](#)) this definition undoubtedly attempt to position PR as a mainstream managerial function within organisations, necessary to be treated on equal terms with other more traditional organisational function such as human resources management, production, marketing and finance. For this study, PR is part of strategic communication practice ([Nhedzi and Gombarume, 2021](#)). A critical ethical challenge for agencies was convincing leadership to be more open. As a managing director of an agency said

Our clients have all been very ethically conscious human beings and organisations. I think one of the biggest challenges is convincing a business to be more open than what (it) is comfortable for them to be. Being vulnerable and open to criticism does not always come easily. D2

Thus, communication professionals are conscious that ethical conduct **is possible when brand leadership is ethical and has an ethical culture underpinned by ethical values vs value washing.**

When organisational culture does not value an ethical stance and is more concerned about self-preservation, the culture breeds opaque crisis communication. Some participants identified

occasions where the **omission of information was done with the intent to create a specific impression for the corporate brand (communication opaqueness)**. A corporate communication manager working in an agency talked about the challenges **one-sided messaging for public** in crisis communication present:

(With) . . . my previous life at the Company X, I think I had those kinds of dilemmas where we had to communicate about scientific breakthroughs. . . . Let's say we work on a vaccine or something, (and) it has to . . . heal. But . . . the same vaccine has side effect(s). So sometimes, how you communicate that, is always a challenge to communicate these issues to the publics. D7

Communication opaqueness and selective transparency at times evolves to the fabrication of information as a risk mitigation strategy. A senior communication manager for a parastatal organisation made a connection to spin doctoring and presenting **misleading information to publics** to protect a brand's reputation. As she described:

There are things that I'll spin right, knowing very well that what I am saying is not necessarily accurate . . . because it's my job to protect the image of the organisation. So, I am not talking about past experiences but what is currently happening now. D4

Another reason for misleading information identified by a group strategic communications manager in higher education was limiting legal liability through deceit and scapegoating. As she explained:

I understand why individuals . . . would not like to be honest or open in their communication. It is because . . . (brands) are afraid of . . . litigations that might . . . (if) they admit, "Yes, we did wrong. Honestly, we didn't follow up on our processes you know." They might want to spin their way out of it, and by doing that, they are losing all their ethics. . . . They will then . . . find a scapegoat to blame it on. D5

She further places the emphasis that they **never admit wrongdoing**.

**So you never admit wrongdoing. You never give that straight answer.** We had to come up with another way of explaining what happened. (We were) not being ethical . . . because we knew we were not telling the truth, whereas we have the obligation of always telling the truth when you're dealing with stakeholders such as family members or any community. The least they deserve is the truth. D5

Another challenge **was the omission of information to create favourable impressions for the benefit of a CEO and senior executive leadership's personal brand. This is another form of opaque communication** as a marketing and communication executive working for a commercial enterprise described.

Yes, the tendency is always to consider what is in one's own personal interest. CEOs, for example, think of what the crisis means for his or her career progression, bonus or earning potential. They may wish to bend the truth or deliberately chose to omit key information that will portray the incident in a less damning light. D6

#### *4.2 Strategic differences between SCPs and executive leadership during a crisis*

This theme highlights the challenges practitioners face whilst attempting to provide strategic counsel during a crisis. SCPs highlighted their **strategic differences with executive leadership**, including detrimental directives, ignoring their counsel, hostility and dismissive attitudes and overrulings from superiors. The **overlooking of practitioner's capability to give strategic counsel** was highlighted by a senior manager in higher education:

You might want to approach a certain crisis in a different manner and your board or CEO feels otherwise- in that they want to do it the other way. So, because they are your bosses, **they overrule**

**you.** And when the crisis is not solved, they are going to come back to you and say that things are not working out- help us out here. D5

Another concern identified by a corporate communication manager working in an agency was that SCPs are seen as channels 'required' to only communicate management's narrowly framed messages.

Sometimes you'll be told (by managers . . . you have to say this . . . D7

You are not even asked for your opinion. What they will require from you is that you hear and understand where they come from so when they ask you to go and communicate, you will understand the discussion. D5

. . . It's [a] top-down approach . . . D4

This top-down approach affects the effective deployment of SCP by management during a crisis. Instead SCPs are observers and not active participants in formulating the crisis containment approaches, counsel and messaging, thereby diminishing their impact and influence.

So, you are there not as an active participant, but you are invited to observe the discussion. And at the end they will say that you were in the meeting and you know where we come from when we decided on 1 2 3- so what do you mean you were not involved or you were not taken seriously? D5

The head of a strategic communication department described how management ignores the counsel of SCPs **and at times are dismissive towards SCPs counsel during a crisis.**

**Ninety-five (%) of the time we are considered as the backroom staff.** Only when the 'Chiefs' are down, that's when they . . . need communication to come to the party. D4

At first, they [executive management] didn't consider us (social media team) when we spoke about having press conferences and press releases. D8

But when it comes to advice, they will not take you seriously for that. D5

These examples demonstrate the challenges associated with undermining SCPs strategic role during a crisis. For those SCPs that did not function at a strategic level, their roles were delimited to providing technical communication support. Communication technicians are content creators who write press releases, newsletters, website content, speeches, blogs and social media posts. Managers handle the bigger picture, assessing the communication goal achievement, problem identification and determining strategy. A specialist practitioner in a PR and media consultancy described a crisis incident where she was not involved in its executive meetings:

In my experience . . . PR is sometimes not considered (as) strategic because most PR officers are not even part of management. E.g. I consulted for an NGO which would not involve PR in its executive meetings. It resulted in a disjoint between what the organisation was trying to do and communicating to the public. D3

A senior communication manager at a parastatal organisation explained:

And if you check, by research . . . what . . . their roles (are) in those teams . . . , they have to take minutes, summarise the discussions and it wouldn't be at a high level. In most cases, if there is voting that needs to be done, your vote as a communicator doesn't count. D5

Implied in such an account is a clear idea of what underrating the value of strategic communication during crisis is. A group communications manager described how senior executives use SCPs when they do not want to be exposed to media.



No, they don't. To elaborate . . . there are a very few that are lucky to be recognised in that manner. Most of us are there because they don't want to handle the media as executives- First of all. So they will have you in their team so that you can do the leg work for them. D5

#### *4.3 Key barriers to the SCPs strategic function during a crisis*

Another point of contention involves inclusion after legal and finance that are prioritised over SCPs during crisis communication. A corporate communications director for an agency explained:

Look, I think from a South African point of view, from a South African context, PR isn't really seen as an important aspect and we don't really get a seat at the table like the industry is overseas, which is highly regarded. What happens in S.A is, when a crisis hits you know you gonna get the accountant, you gonna get the lawyers and it's only right at the very end when (the) thing hit(s) the fan that they call in PR practitioners. And I think a lot of what PR practitioners have been trying to do, is to say no, PR needs to sit at the boardroom table. So when a crisis happens instead of calling lawyers, instead of calling the accountants, you need someone from a communications point of view to sit at the table and say okay guys, this is how we are going to handle this because the PR practitioners will say, well what happened? And not what happened so that we can cover it up, what happened so that we can be honest. What are the steps that you are going to use to rectify this problem? D9

Another issue that limits their strategic function centres on how language is used to obfuscate events. The use of plain language is necessary, particularly in a multicultural and multilingual context like Africa.

. . . they (were) honest, the language they used was very simple which relates back to . . . (their) purpose . . . There wasn't a lot of jargon and lawyers and trying to cover up. The communication was simple. D9

A major challenge is a critical mass of practitioners in the decision-making process.

If more and more PR people are brought in, the things that have been happening in the South African space is caused by a lack of ethics from PR practitioners, it's just having a lack of PR practitioners on the table to advise sufficiently. D9

Another challenge is the lack of diversity in the strategic team on a racial, gender and professional level. This reinforces existing bias and increases brand risk by creating culturally offensive content. Only a native of a culture has the aptitude and know-how to identify the risk. As a corporate communications director for an agency said:

I think in the South African context, the answer is no. We are always called right at the end when things have really turned south, and people are bringing in the PR/ Strategic stakeholders. I think from the very beginning, .. you (should) do the right things . . . For example, there was a . . . campaign and (it) had an all-White group of influencers. And there was such backlash to say, but guys you know we have got the whole Black Lives Matter happening right now, you know we have been talking about equality in the creative industry, and now you bring this campaign. And the response was, oh sorry, no we will just add another black person. And if you think about it that is an incorrect response because this is such a deep issue that has impacted people of colour around the world. So had you had strategic communication from the beginning, they would have outlined those kinds of risks. So I think in a South African context, no executive management doesn't really consider having us as important. D9

Transformation and equity are sensitive due to globally prominent protests like “#Black Lives Matters”.

#### *4.4 Management's marginalisation of the SCP's values in crisis decision-making*

Not only has limiting the communication function impacted its strategic role, but it has also caused the SCP to receive **instructions from executive leadership that encourage the**

**violation of practitioners' ethical value principles.** Some participants seemed openly troubled by this. As one corporate communication manager admitted:

On gut feeling vs the organisation: Oh, quite a difficult one to answer but . . . Yes, we come across these ethical dilemmas at all times. . . . [Situations where] I know that my belief or my background, or my upbringing does not believe in me saying such a thing. . . . So, then cause you do things on the behalf of the organisation, even through your personal values play a role, but since you do things on the behalf of an organisation; You have to go about what **the values of the organisation say.** D7

This means the brand is equated with what the leadership says and not the value statements of the brand. Several SCPs also discussed how they had to 'spin' to protect their clients. **Spin doctoring and silencing the organisational ethical conscience can be contrasted between those with strong moral convictions that they act on, the ones that feel compelled to violate their mores to protect clients and their livelihood.** As a senior communication manager who is the head of communications explained:

And, unfortunately, we differ as people, some people can lie with a straight face, some people can't but you have to spin whatever they want you to spin . . . the situation forces us to even though you as a person, you may not necessarily be a 'liar' so to speak- do you understand. For me that's not ethical, but **someone has to do it and unfortunately that person is me.** D4

A group manager in charge of strategic communications described how she felt uncomfortable yet compelled to 'spin doctoring' to serve her clients.

Am I comfortable to tell these people (lies), and I think there's such a term in Strategic Communication where you will get somebody saying now, but I can spin that story?- What is spinning, what do you mean by spinning? You may have somebody telling me that you are a spin doctor. To be honest, for me it says that you **are a liar, you're willing to say everything or are willing to do anything to save your skin or the skin of your client.** And that's what your clients want, they want you to save them, but then where are your ethics? D5

In addition, SCPs said they have noticed a need for considering personal values; however, due to the lack of ethical communication considerations, they compromise and do as they are instructed. A senior communication manager used a coping mechanism but still gave in to organisational pressure.

In my personal view, my own values must always be noted. You must always make it clear that this is my personal view professionally. That's how I would do things. **As long as it's recorded, you can tell the organisational lie,** but knowing very well that this is not something that you agree with but you are just discharging it is as it is because, before being a communicator, I am a human being with my own values. D4

## 5. Discussion

Five key findings emerge from this study that shed new light on the understanding of the limited role of SCPs in handling ethical communication during a crisis. The first is the challenge around convincing organisational leadership to be more open. Openness was seen as risky and instead, management practised communication opaqueness and selective transparency. To achieve this, SCPs were excluded from executive meetings. In a study in Durban, South Africa with a similar research design, Gqamane (2010, p. 97) found that PR "does not contribute to top-level decision making within the organisation." The findings highlight that SCPs were involved in media relations and not decision-making. Participants felt overlooked, and their disciplinary capability to give strategic counsel was undermined during crisis situations. Others positioned their ethical responsibility as ending once leadership makes a decision. When SCPs are not perceived as strategic counsel, they are

relegated to the role of communication technicians and excluded from organisational decision-making (Gqamane, 2010). They are deployed as implementers of communication programmes inclusive of community relations, fundraising and corporate social responsibility (Gqamane, 2010).

Participants widely concurred that ethical values must drive transparency, honesty and openness (Bowen *et al.*, 2016). The use of gut feeling was mentioned by some participants, similar to Place's (2015) results on how SCPs evaluate or reflect upon ethical decisions. The authors found that professionals evaluate ethical decisions by conducting "gut checks", asking questions on personal, organisational and societal levels (Place, 2015). SCPs are often influenced by gut feelings or those based on experience instead of strategic analyses or sophisticated data analytics. The findings are consistent with the claim that designates ethics as the most vital building block in an organisation's "DNA" (Bowen *et al.*, 2016, p. 14). The findings demonstrate that professionals were involved in communicating misleading information to protect the brand image and reputation, and spin doctoring was discussed as unethical. As the previous literature has argued, such practices are deeply problematic, not to mention again contradictory to what SCPs represent (Jackson and Moloney, 2019, p. 97). This could be a result of the SCP misunderstanding the strategic communication profession, especially the subfield of PR. Rosenberg (2013) notes that many assume PR is preoccupied with image making or creating false façades of organisations during a crisis.

Professionals actively omitted information to impress executive and non-executive leadership. These unethical omissions of information are interrelated with the second finding: the challenge of strategic differences between professionals and executive leadership. These included open hostility and dismissive attitudes from leadership. Some participants compromised their ethical standards due to their leadership's coercive power. Participants narrated being overruled and discomforted over handling things unethically. This research reinforces the conclusion Tilley (2017, p. 79) offered: "ethical dilemmas were frequent, widespread, and often handled in ways that practitioners themselves were uncomfortable with".

The third emergent key finding is as follows: the communication technician or tactician/strategist role without a seat in management is limiting their function. The researchers witnessed SCPs being treated as mere observers while legal and financial professionals were given prominent roles in crisis containment activities and decision-making. This finding reinforces the results of similar studies (Macnamara, 2021, p. 80) and demonstrates that while SCPs may use other functions, "it is noteworthy that (strategic communication) in the companies studied is restricted to writing and distributing news releases, media relations, and media monitoring via monitoring and analysis agencies." This raises the 'why' question that was explored. One reason for this revealed in interviews is that senior management could not view SCPs beyond the channel or technicians' demarcation and their responsibility (Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017) "for communication tactics like news releases, organising press conferences, employee newsletters, position papers, designers for brochures and media placements" (Geremew, 2017, p. 140). This was despite expressing ambitions for an expanded role as a strategist. SCPs experienced a top-down approach from top management.

This leads to the fourth finding: data indication management's marginalisation of the SCP's values in crisis decisions. This echoes Geremew's (2017, p. 152) findings that SCPs in PR are rarely involved in strategic planning, in decision-making and in following up the implementation of plans in their organisations. Therefore, the ethical code of conduct is not enhanced in organisations because managers direct what SCPs should say.

## 6. Conclusion

This study highlights risk and crisis communication from a global south perspective and the challenges faced by a select group of SCPs in enacting ethical crisis communication.

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Attempts to fulfil their duty as the moral compass of their organisations by advocating for organisational transparency lead to criticism and marginalisation. Executive leadership overlooked the professional capability of practitioners to give strategic counsel, designating SCPs as technicians or tacticians and not as strategists. The lack of a seat at management level is limiting their function.

### *6.1 Implications for practice and future research*

With regard to future research, investigating a larger sample by surveying SCPs in more diverse industries and across broader market categories using quantitative analysis would enable the generalisability of the study in public and private companies. Future research can utilise the grounded theory and Ubuntu theory as the theoretical framework to generate an African model of communication, an authentic model informed and co-created by sub-Saharan Africans for its context. Africa's multiculturalism offers a unique lens on how organisations from the global north can adapt current approaches using African indigenous knowledge systems and values such as ubuntu to navigate the current challenges around equity, diversity and inclusion. Future studies should also seek to determine how SCPs can encourage moral sensitivity through ethical decision-making, especially in times of crisis in a pandemic or disaster with fatalities. As this study was limited to SCPs, future research should also address the perception of other stakeholders such as CEOs and media professionals on ethical communication.

Within South Africa the implementation of African based value systems within organisational settings can be explored to potentially reduce the tension SCPs face in enacting their roles, as they toggle and struggle between their marginalised African mores and value systems and western capitalist-driven work contexts. Similarly, African value systems venerate superiors and elders and do not encourage confronting them as it is seen as undesirable and a reflection of a lack of morals. This and retaining employment could be an unconscious reason for unethical enduring practices that violate SCP's personal value systems. The reality is that contemporary corporate contexts in Africa are hybrids of an African–Western worldview. Current conceptualisations of communication management in Africa should reflect these nuances and complexities.

In an increasingly brand risk laden environment that is influenced by the socio-economic, technological and Euro-centricity biased values on ethics, SCPs' management needs to proactively consider Ubuntu principles' adaptation in the private and government crisis communication system. The more exposed a brand is to a crisis, the more attention is needed on the role of SCP in the boardroom. To shift a brand towards the importance of communication responsibilities, it is important to define the competence towards crisis communication, to be self-critical and to be proactive. To address the limited role of SCPs in ethical communication management, the authors propose systematic solutions to rethink the role and management approach of leaders during a crisis to inoculate against various challenges and reinstate trust in the leadership of an organisation. Systematic solutions involve rethinking of contextualising crisis communication based on Ubuntu perspectives. Too often, leadership has become uncoupled from the reality on the ethical communication role of the offerings they adorn. But leaders are not ends in themselves; they are effective in the best approach to indigenous values of outstanding offerings. SCPs can act as interpretive frames, but they do not unilaterally create reality, as many seem to believe. SCPs should not be seen as and managed as technicians by leadership.

### *6.2 Limitations*

Our study was limited to ten SCPs in South Africa with an average of 14.6 years of experience, so the results cannot be generalised. Despite this limitation, our findings offer insight into the perceptions of junior, mid and senior level SCPs with more than five years of experience and

should be interpreted as investigative rather than seeking to generalise findings to all strategic communication. They can also offer a glimpse into the organisational culture and practices that fuelled some of the scandals that rocked corporate South Africa. Our sample was South African based organisations but differed on factors such as organisation size, the type and geography that is consistent with the goal of qualitative research is demonstrating the variety of depth of the experiences to build theory (Drumwright and Murphy, 2004). This is a baseline study for myriad future work within the country, in other countries and in comparative analyses.

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