

The role of strategic communication in driving marketing decision-making

Received
02nd February 2024

Revised
18th June 2024

Accepted
11th July 2024

Mirko Olivieri - Lala Hu - Alessia Anzivino

Abstract

Framing of the research: *In recent years, the academic literature has focused on the topic of strategic communication as an emerging field of knowledge encompassing public relations, organizational communication and marketing communications. In this research stream, scholars interpret strategic communication as a discipline that embraces complexity and interdisciplinarity, with the aim of fully grasping the different nuances of the organization without neglecting strategy, orientation, and organizational objectives.*

Purpose of the paper. *The aim of this study is to investigate the role of strategic communication in the marketing decision-making process.*

Methodology. *We conducted a qualitative multiple-case study analysis involving five companies operating in the food industry. Specifically, we collected qualitative data from seven semi-structured interviews with key informants operating in the case companies, company visits, and secondary data. Using multiple methods to collect qualitative data from various sources was useful to avoid bias from a single method and to obtain robust results.*

Findings. *The results highlight that strategic communication plays an increasingly central role in the marketing decision-making process of companies. Specifically, our analysis reveals that, on the one hand, strategic communication influences product policy, while on the other, it fosters the innovation of marketing communications.*

Research limits. *This study presents limitations related to the generalizability of the results, as it adopts a qualitative perspective. Future studies could include the consumer perspective by adopting quantitative methodologies.*

Practical implications. *The analysis presents a series of implications for communication and marketing professionals, and in particular for corporate communication directors, identifying the potential of their role in the company's strategic decisions.*

Originality of the paper. *This study contributes to the management literature by clarifying the ways in which strategic communication influences the marketing decision-making process. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study depicting a framework summarizing how strategic communication influences companies' product policy and marketing communications.*

Key words: *strategic communication; marketing decision-making; marketing communications; multiple-case study.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, a series of disruptive events, including the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing wars, have made the economic situation at the global level particularly uncertain. The recent geopolitical crises complicated the international scenario, with strong repercussions for inflation and consumption dynamics (Istat, 2023).

In this scenario, corporate communication has changed profoundly, playing an increasingly central role not only in developing the company's reputational capital but also in organizational decision-making and strategic processes, bringing out paradigms based on co-creation mechanisms between firms and stakeholders (Siano *et al.*, 2022). In fact, these unexpected events have led to a reinterpretation of corporate communication and the recognition of its role in achieving a competitive advantage in a new communication scenario (Ceccotti *et al.*, 2019). According to a recent study by EY Italy (2022), 54% of Italian companies increased their attention toward the communication function over the last 3 years, and for 64% of firms, the communication function took on an increasingly strategic role, which was adequately recognized in the company.

Corporate communication, therefore, has become central to both the functioning and development of the company as a support for its various components, and represents a necessary tool for integrating those same components (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2015). More generally, corporate communication has taken a strategic role in the management of relationships with the markets and in the governance of the company in terms of management of the corporate structure (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018).

In this vein, the strategic communication approach involves continuous processes ranging from construction, presentation, implementation, negotiation, and reconstruction of the company strategy (Van Ruler, 2018), overcoming communication models focused on conversations and relationships, which are no longer sufficient (Falkheimer and Heide, 2023). Therefore, strategic communication was conceptualized as “an agile management process in which the focus is on feeding the arenas in which meanings are presented, negotiated, constructed, or reconstructed for strategy building and strategy implementation, and on testing strategic decisions by presenting and negotiating these in a continuous loop” (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 379).

Given this scenario and considering the complex and multidimensional nature of strategic communication, it is necessary to reconsider its role in business decisions and in the marketing approach (Collesei, 2012). Although scholars have conducted many studies on strategic communication in recent years (i.e., Argenti, 2017; Falkheimer, 2014; Rudeloff *et al.*, 2022), it remains necessary to investigate how communication affects the definition and implementation of business strategies by influencing the marketing decision-making process. Hence, we pose the following research question:

RQ. How does strategic communication affect decision-making processes in marketing?

To address this RQ, we investigated the role of strategic communication in companies from the food and beverage (F&B) industry, exploring how corporate communication could influence companies' activities, impacting innovative business decisions in light of modern society's transformations.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the academic literature on strategic communication, highlighting the various definitions and interpretations of the concept, while in Section 3, the methodology adopted to address our research aim is explained-i.e., a multiple-case study analysis. The findings are presented in Section 4, and the discussion and conclusion are reported in Section 5, focusing on both the theoretical contribution and the managerial implications of this research. Finally, limitations and future research directions conclude the manuscript.

2. Literature review

2.1 Strategic communication in academic literature

The concept of strategic communication began to spread in management and communication studies in the second decade of the twenty-first century (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015). Previously, this concept was known within national governments and armed forces (Farwell, 2012). Nowadays, particularly in the United States and Europe, strategic communication has been introduced in universities by linking it to the fields of marketing and corporate communication, public relations, financial communication, etc. (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015). However, strategic communication today is understood by scholars as a distinct approach focused on the communication process, opening new spaces for interdisciplinary research (Argenti, 2017).

Indeed, over the past few decades, the academic literature has focused on the topic of strategic communication as the omnidirectional diachronic ongoing process of meaning construction (Macnamara, 2018; Sandhu, 2009; Van Ruler, 2018; Zerfass and Huck, 2007), emphasizing the role of communication departments in complex organizations. In this process, the importance of communication alignment between organizational objectives, vision, brand, and identity emerged (Botan, 2018).

In general terms, strategic communication is defined as an "emerging field of knowledge bridging established research fields such as public relations, organizational communication and marketing communications" (Falkheimer and Heide, 2023, p. 15)-i.e., an interdisciplinary paradigm (Werder *et al.*, 2018). In this vein, Heide *et al.* (2018) interpreted strategic communication as a discipline that embraces complexity and interdisciplinarity, with the aim of fully grasping the different nuances of the organization without neglecting strategy, orientation, and organizational objectives.

One of the first definitions of strategic communication proposed by Hallahan *et al.* (2007) interprets the concept as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission. However, this

definition has been superseded by other theorizations of the concept, which focus on how strategic communication can support an organization in fulfilling its mission (Volk and Zerfass, 2018). In this perspective, strategic communication has been defined as an overall strategy to improve the strategic positioning of an organization (Argenti *et al.*, 2005). Accordingly, Zerfass *et al.* (2018, p. 493) defined strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals.” In this definition, therefore, strategic communication refers to both messaging and listening activities, including dialogues with stakeholders, social media monitoring, and information from employees. In other words, this new role of communication is considered strategic when it becomes substantial or significant for the development, growth, identity, or survival of the organization (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). To achieve these objectives, strategic communication requires an integrated and multilevel approach in which each organizational function achieves specific objectives through the most appropriate and effective channels. In fact, to make this strategic communication approach effective, all channels must be personalized with respect to the specific objective to be achieved, but at the same time consistent with both each other and the company’s overall strategy (Argenti *et al.*, 2005).

2.2 *The role of strategic communication in achieving business objectives*

According to the management literature, strategic communication offers a concrete contribution to the decision-making organizational process in an evolving business context (Invernizzi *et al.*, 2012), as it represents a critical organizational management process (Romenti and Invernizzi, 2011; Falkheimer, 2014).

In general terms, according to Volk and Zerfass (2018), the common thread of strategic communication studies is the emphasis on the notion of purposeful, intentional, or objectives-driven. Falkheimer *et al.* (2017), for example, argued that this concept is key for the development of effective business strategies, as strategic communication can contribute to business success. To achieve this business aim, Argenti *et al.* (2005) showed that strategic communication requires an integrated, multilevel approach. According to this framework, each communication function achieves specific objectives through the most appropriate channels.

Particularly, Invernizzi and Romenti (2015) identified four contributions of strategic communication for organizations, namely alignment, energizing, visionary, and constitutive roles. These two authors interpreted strategic communication as a support to the organization to achieve alignment with external expectations, and particularly for monitoring the activities and the organizational context, capable of providing key inputs to align corporate strategies with stakeholders’ expectations and ensure the organization’s survival and legitimacy. More specifically, Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) identified a link between discourse and the social practice of strategy, defining this practice as a set of interactions and negotiations of multiple actors they draw upon in accomplishing that activity.

However, recent academic studies have highlighted that strategic communication is not managed only internally by the organization, but for the achievement of its strategic objectives, it also includes external actors and practices, such as the so-called “strategic social media influencer communication.” For example, according to Enke and Borchers (2019), strategic social media influencer communication is playing an increasingly key role, both in strategic communication studies and in business practices. Social media influencers represent third-party actors who have considerable influence on organizational stakeholders through the production and distribution of content and interaction with stakeholders (Freberg *et al.*, 2011). Hence, in this perspective, strategic social media communication is conceptualized as the strategic use of communication in which influencers, on the one hand, perform activities of strategic relevance to organizational goals, and on the other, take an active part in interactive processes on topics relevant to the organization, adopting a moderating role (Enke and Borchers, 2019).

More generally, the role of digital channels is increasingly central to the strategic communication debate. A recent study by Wuersch *et al.* (2024) revealed that both the technical nature of the organizational system, such as digital platforms, and social digital elements-i.e., the corporate culture-are interconnected at all levels of communication. In this scenario, companies’ ability to communicate and interact independently on digital platforms has become a critical area for the strategic management of communication (Valentini *et al.*, 2012). As a result, new strategic communication practices are required for organizations (Pekkala and Erkkilä, 2024), such as identifying new ways to increase user engagement on social media (Triantafyllidou and Yannas, 2024).

In conclusion, strategic communication has a multidirectional and complex nature that must be managed in harmony with the organizational context (O’Connor and Shumate, 2018). In this perspective, strategic communication involves the interconnection of organizations, messages, and stakeholders, and plays a key role in creating and maintaining business relationships between the parties (Knudsen and Lemmergaard, 2014; Merz *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, recent strategic communication studies have adopted a multidimensional network perspective, which allows scholars to analyze the diverse types of networks that strategic communication helps create, maintain, and dissolve.

In this regard, O’Connor and Shumate (2018, p. 400) revealed that “both the network strategies created, and the outcomes of those strategies are described in network terms.” According to them, as the affiliation network around an organization increases, so does the number of actors who share the organization’s message. In summary, three factors determine the results of a company’s engagement efforts: (1) the prior state of the affiliate network, (2) the effectiveness of the organization’s network strategies, and (3) the effects of the strategies network of other organizational actors (O’Connor and Shumate, 2018). In addition, a study by Young and Pieterse (2015) showed that strategic communication professionals should also leverage the capital derived from the composition and structure of the interpersonal network to facilitate information flows in networks. It is believed that

networks are beneficial for accessing unique and non-redundant sources of information.

3. Methodology

The objective of this research is to investigate how strategic communication influences the marketing decision-making process of organizations. In pursuing this research objective, we considered a constitutive view of strategic communication-i.e., the intentional and purposeful use of communication that contributes to the achievement of business objectives (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2015; Volk and Zerfass, 2018).

Due to the exploratory aim of this paper and following previous studies on strategic communication (i.e., Besley *et al.*, 2016; Birá *et al.*, 2018; Nothhaft, 2016; Rudeloff *et al.*, 2022), we conducted qualitative research. In particular, we opted for the case study methodology (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009). Specifically, a multiple-case study analysis was conducted, as “the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as more robust” (Yin, 1984, p. 48). By conducting a multiple-case study, researchers can bring together several patterns and draw a more complete theoretical picture (Eisenhardt, 1989). This methodology allows for an in-depth study of the phenomenon that is the object of our analysis-i.e., the role of strategic communication in the marketing decision-making process-thereby increasing its theoretical understanding (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

In this research, five Italian companies operating in the food and beverage (F&B) industry have been analyzed. According to Eisenhardt (1989), between four and 10 cases usually suffice for multiple-case studies.

3.1 Research context

The study analyzes the F&B sector because of its economic importance worldwide and its strong cultural influence on communications (Appelbaum and Halliburton, 1993). At the global level, the projected market volume of the F&B market will reach US\$3.80bn by 2027 (Statista, 2024). F&B companies adopt communications, using both traditional and digital tools, to communicate their sustainability actions to consumers and other stakeholders as communication reflects firm values (Belyaeva *et al.*, 2020; Reilly and Heinan, 2014). Moreover, Tseng *et al.* (2020) have recently found that persuasive communication effectively used by F&B companies can help convince consumers to address a sustainable consumption transition. Thus, the F&B industry is an adequate setting for investigating our research question.

3.2 Case studies selection and data collection

To select our case studies, we opted for the theoretical sampling method (Mason, 2002). We chose five different cases operating in the

Italian F&B industry. To ensure heterogeneity in our sample, we selected companies of different sizes-i.e. Firms A, D, and E are SMEs, while Firms B and C are multinational organizations-with a consequent diversity of corporate communication departments. In addition, as reported in Table 1, the five companies offer different products in the food and beverage sector. Therefore, these case studies, with their differences and similarities (Cucino *et al.*, 2024; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), were considered particularly interesting for the explorative purpose of this paper.

Within the five case studies, we identified seven key informants with extensive professional experience and knowledge of the corporate communication and marketing strategies of their organizations, including communication directors, corporate communication managers, and marketing managers (Table 1).

Tab. 1: Companies' overview and interviewed key informants

Company	Product category	Key informants' role	Headquarters region	Foundation year
Firm A	Cured meat	1. Marketing manager	Lombardy, Italy	1812
Firm B	Packaged F&B	2. External communication manager 3. Corporate communication and digital specialist 4. Corporate communication manager	Lombardy, Italy	1866
Firm C	Tomato sauce	5. Corporate communication director	Emilia Romagna, Italy	1899
Firm D	Olive oil	6. Communication and image director	Umbria, Italy	1920
Firm E	Fruits and vegetables	7. Founder	Emilia Romagna, Italy	2015

Source: Authors' elaboration

In particular, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the seven key informants face-to-face, via phone, or MS Teams, between February and October 2023. The semi-structured interviews lasted 45 minutes on average and were conducted in Italian. All the interviews were audiotaped, and the registrations were then transcribed and analyzed through content analysis (Neuman, 1997) performed by the researchers involved in the interpretation process.

We used semi-structured questions to allow the interviewees to answer as completely as possible. Moreover, subsequent discussions were informal and facilitated by supporting questions. Specifically, the interviews followed an interview protocol developed by the researchers based on the literature review. The protocol covered the following topics:

1. The role of strategic communication in the organization;
2. The definition process of the business strategy, with a focus on the contribution of strategic communication; and
3. The specific activities of the marketing and communication departments, and the synergies between the two.

Moreover before or after the interviews, the key informants or other professionals working in the analyzed companies shared additional documents with the researchers that could be useful for the purpose of this research, such as corporate presentations, articles on the communication

campaigns they promoted, and materials relating to specific communication projects. We guaranteed anonymity to the organizations involved in the research to reduce social pressure and ensure that the data collected could not be traced back to individual respondents (Krosnick and Presser, 2010; Coffelt, 2017).

Furthermore, data collection included the participation of researchers in company events and visits. These data were collected in parallel, and the various sets of results were interpreted concurrently to draw valid conclusions regarding the research problem.

3.3 Data analysis

For the data analysis of the case studies, the researchers identified the commonalities rather than the case differences, as the analysis process was guided by insights applicable across all the firms (Hu and Olivieri, 2021). According to Eisenhardt (1989), multiple cases represent a powerful means of creating theory because they allow replication and extension between individual cases. In this methodology, the former is considered crucial, starting from individual cases, and is useful for corroborating specific propositions. In this way, random associations are eliminated, and the findings produce more nuanced and complex theories (Eisenhardt, 1989). Following Yin's (2009) approach, if the outcome of the replication was contradictory to the initial proposition, then we reviewed the data and again tested the proposition with other cases.

More specifically, for the data analysis in this study, we adopted an abductive approach-i.e., a non-linear research process that continuously compares data and theory. According to this process, the theoretical framework was modified based on the empirical findings derived from the data analysis, after which the new framework was elaborated. In this systematic combining approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), matching between theory and data is crucial; that is, going back and forth comparing the theoretical framework, data sources, and analysis.

In particular, for the analysis of the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews, we followed the recommendations made by Corbin and Strauss (1990), opting for an open, axial, and selective coding strategy. Then, we identified the key points found in the interview transcripts and labeled them as codes. The ones with thematic affinity were grouped and formed the categories that were correlated with each other in the last phase. In this way, the thematic subcategories were defined.

Finally, to increase the robustness of the study, as recommended by Yin (2013), the data collected from the semi-structured interviews were triangulated with secondary data (i.e., trend reports, social media accounts, analysis of communication campaigns, corporate websites, etc.).

4. Findings

The results show the critical role of strategic communication in driving marketing decision-making processes. In particular, it emerges from the

analysis of the five case studies that strategic communication has become a structural component of corporate strategic and operational processes, with particular reference to marketing strategies. More specifically, the competence of communication departments has become central in the decision-making and coordination activities of both product policy and marketing communications. On the one hand, corporate communication plays an increasingly central role in defining and innovating a product policy capable of satisfying consumer needs. On the other, corporate communication plays a strategic role in activating relationships with the market-i.e., in marketing communications.

Mirko Olivieri
Lala Hu
Alessia Anzivino
The role of strategic
communication in driving
marketing decision-making

4.1 The contribution of strategic communication for defining and innovating product policy

The results highlight that strategic communication influences the product policy and product development of the analyzed companies. The founder of Firm E explained: “Communication comes even before the product development. It has an impact on the development of the market.” Specifically, in the case of Firm E, communication was crucial to give credit to the product and move away from a bucolic product narrative to a different and more strategic communication that highlighted the product’s characteristics and the ecosystem around the offering system. Through investment in communication, an attempt was made to work on the product itself, which also became the bearer of industry-related values related to a specific profession. Products’ storytelling has also become essential to intercept new segments of consumers, particularly younger ones.

Regarding the role of communication in the definition of the product policy, the corporate communication director of Firm C declared that his department detected from consumers the need to diversify the offer by using new raw materials. This need, after careful analysis supervised by top management, resulted in the expansion of their marketing offer. In 2019, Firm C included, among its products, a yellow tomato sauce made with the yellow datterino tomato, which was highly appreciated by consumers.

In this vein, the marketing manager of Firm A highlighted that through communication, they are able to intercept new and different targets. In recent years, in line with the newest consumption trends related to food, they decided to develop a new pure product line. The pure line guarantees products with a natural taste resulting from the choice of high-quality raw materials and a supply chain that respects animal welfare at every stage. In particular, these products are defined as pure because they have no preservatives or antibiotics and because they come from a controlled and certified supply chain. In the same product line, in consideration of the consumer feedback that the Firm A communication department detected on various channels, gluten-free, lactose-free, without added polyphosphates, and without added glutamate products have been introduced, broadening the marketing offer.

Corporate communication also played a key role in the development of new products within Firm B. In this case, the communication department, among its activities, identified the consumption trends at an early stage

to adapt the product portfolio in collaboration with the marketing department. For example, Firm B recently capitalized on vegan and vegetarian trends by leveraging its classic brands. Therefore, the product offering was expanded to include coffee creamers and dairy-free ice creams in the United States, plant-based drinks in Brazil, and products similar to meat but of plant origin in Europe. Finally, through recent acquisitions of new brands, Firm B rapidly expanded its offering of natural, organic, and plant-based products in Latin America, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The external communication manager of Firm B affirmed, “Our promise is supporting and speeding up the transition to a regenerative food system, focusing on accessible and sustainable nutrition”. To meet these new consumer trends linked to the theme of sustainability, in addition to considering the characteristics of the product, Firm B, also paid attention to packaging using environmentally friendly materials and communicating this choice on various offline and online channels.

It emerges from our data analysis that in some case studies, such as Firms A, B, and E, packaging represented a tool to communicate sustainability to their stakeholders. In particular, for Firm E, packaging was also a way to communicate some social sustainability issues, such as issues related to prevention, genomics, and healthy lifestyles. Consistent with the company’s mission and its focus on prevention issues-which was also made concrete through constant funding for entities involved in scientific research-through the communication of its products, the company sought to bring its targets closer to issues that until now had been disclosed only by doctors or specialists in the field, but using simpler language.

4.2 The role of strategic communication in innovating marketing communications

Our study reveals that strategic communication plays a key role in innovating companies’ marketing communication strategies. For example, in Firm B, the department of corporate communication noted the need to make its marketing communication strategy more inclusive and oriented toward the diversities of its target. The corporate communication manager of Firm B stated, “Considering that the Italian population is very varied and that we have a portfolio of brands and products for all Italian families, (...) we need to be careful when writing copy, therefore from the point of view of marketing communication.” To make its marketing communication strategy more appropriate in the current social context, in consideration of the diversity of consumers, Firm B also promoted a series of internal communication activities addressed to all employees. For example, various workshops were held to raise employee awareness of the topic of diversity and inclusion. According to the corporate communication manager of Firm B, the company has taken this path rather than imposing guidelines on inclusive language on its employees because it is necessary to promote a cultural change naturally reflected in marketing communication strategies.

Similarly, Firm C, in line with the digital communication paradigms, launched an online communication campaign dedicated to international markets using the levers of the advergame to increase brand awareness and

strengthen the bond between users and the brand. The objective of this campaign was to involve and entertain consumers, informing them about the life cycle that the tomato goes through and explaining the processing techniques that allow the brand to preserve the preciousness and freshness of the raw material. In particular, the campaign was made up of three mini-games through which the user comes into contact with the many varieties of tomato and chooses which one to grow, respecting the rhythms of nature, and concluding the experience with the harvesting of the fruits that have reached maturation.

Through this communication campaign, Firm C described the processes of its supply chain in an innovative way, with reference to the processing phases that characterize its products, highlighting the Italian tradition to international consumers.

Furthermore, the role of corporate communication is increasingly central to communicating business strategy, such as the adoption of a sustainable approach. In this regard, the founder of Firm E declared:

“We invest a lot in sustainability. We were the first to adopt the compostable films, and without the communication, the message would not have reached the consumer and it is an important message to give awareness to the consumer, but also to make him understand the costs linked to this type of choice. Therefore, [it is] a communication that also helps to make company choices understood.”

Collected data has also shown that for Firm E, communication was crucial not only in informing customers about its strategic decisions, but also in highlighting its partnerships with other sustainability-oriented companies from various sectors. Additionally, the company’s emphasis on communication has helped it establish a unique market position in an industry that appears to be highly competitive.

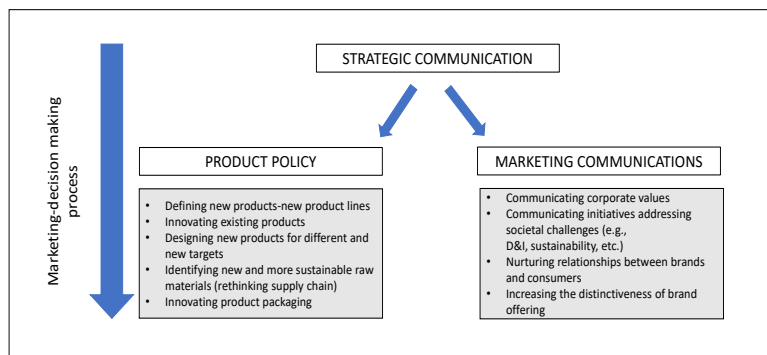
Likewise, the role of the communication department was key for Firm C in communicating organizational choices regarding social sustainability. Its corporate communication director said that his company decided for several years to purchase raw materials only from companies that respect some parameters that protect workers, preventing them from being exploited to obtain greater results. Firm C also introduced an anonymous system to report suppliers that did not respect these parameters. To convey to stakeholders and consumers the importance of these social sustainability initiatives, the role of corporate communication was fundamental and influenced the marketing strategy.

5. Discussion

From our research, it emerges that strategic communication drives the marketing decision-making processes of companies, particularly in relation to their product policy, and marketing communications. Figure 1 represents a framework focusing on how strategic communication

influences the marketing decision-making process of the analyzed organizations.

Fig. 1: Framework



Source: Authors' elaboration

With regard to product policy, the results of our analysis reveal that strategic communication plays a key role in product innovation that is implemented to meet consumers' needs. Consistent with the study by Falahat *et al.* (2020), our findings highlight the importance of product innovation capabilities within companies to obtain a competitive advantage. To this end, our key informants reiterated, for example, that strategic digital communication campaigns allowed them to interact with consumers in a more direct way, to constantly monitor consumers' reactions and feedback related to their products, such as in the case of the communication campaign of Firm C dedicated to international consumers. In this vein, as argued by Enke and Borchers (2019), strategic communication assumes a central role in business practices-i.e., product innovation. Indeed, the analyzed companies have adapted their products considering the consumers' reactions, suggestions, and comments. The case companies have innovated existing products, such as introducing more sustainable raw materials or investing in sustainable packaging. Moreover, companies have launched new product lines in existing markets or have developed new products for international markets. From a strategic perspective, firms that leverage communications as a key resource react faster and gain a competitive advantage.

In addition, data analysis has shown that companies, through appropriate strategic communication processes, develop new offerings (Anzivino, 2021; Durmusoglu *et al.*, 2022) considering the diverse targets of consumers, and succeed in making their brands more inclusive and acceptable, such as in the case of Firm A, which developed a new product line to intercept a broader target with different needs. Indeed, according to Invernizzi and Romenti (2015), strategic communication also plays an alignment role of values both between the different departments of organizations (internal level) and the company and its stakeholders (external level). With regard to marketing communications, our research confirms that strategic communication plays a crucial role in several

objectives. For example, strategic communication helps firms spread corporate values among stakeholders and, in general, fulfill the corporate mission (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). In addition, our results demonstrate that strategic communication is key to successfully addressing societal challenges (Colleoni *et al.*, 2022; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). The communication activities implemented by the analyzed firms express corporate values and give visibility to their actions. For example, it has emerged that strategic communication drives business decisions about diversity, equity, and inclusion topics, including gender (Cowart and Wagner, 2021; Zayer *et al.*, 2019) or ethnicity (Peñaloza, 2018; Strebinger *et al.*, 2018). Companies have recently adopted more inclusive marketing communications toward different targets, both externally and internally. Externally, institutional communications related to companies' sustainability actions toward the environment or workers contribute to improving the overall corporate image. Internally, several communications activities promote companies' welfare initiatives and employees' well-being. Also, from a consumer perspective, internal communication improves the overall corporate reputation.

Moreover, our findings show that strategic communication in F&B companies is taking on an increasingly important role in strengthening existing business relationships, identifying new key players, and, in general, developing effective business strategies. According to Falkheimer *et al.* (2017), strategic communication can contribute to the success of organizations if effectively adopted in an integrated manner into company processes.

In line with the latest research, it emerges from our analysis that there is a need for more research on the role of practitioners in making decisions about diversity and inclusion (Windels, 2016), and meeting the needs of minorities-limitedly considered by most firms in the past.

5.1 Theoretical contribution

At the theoretical level, this study responds to the need for more empirical research in the field of strategic communication (Falkheimer, 2014) by providing an original study in the context of the F&B industry. Specifically, our findings highlight the central role of strategic communication in driving the marketing decision-making process of companies operating in the F&B industry. Indeed, although previous studies have focused on the influence of corporate communication on marketing strategies (Invernizzi *et al.*, 2009), this research highlights the areas of the marketing decision-making process impacted by strategic communication that are product policy and the development of marketing communications. With this research, we contribute to the management literature clarifying how the marketing decision-making process is strongly influenced by strategic communication. On the one hand, the product policy of the companies is affected by strategic communication, which is crucial to designing new product lines, innovating existing products, and adopting more sustainable raw materials, as requested by the emerging sustainable and ethical trends of consumption (Illia *et al.*, 2017). On the other hand, strategic

communication is key in innovating marketing communications, and specifically to nurturing the relationship between brands and consumers and other stakeholders, increasing the distinctiveness of the offering and communicating corporate values.

5.2 Managerial implications

This study presents a series of practical implications for marketing and communication professionals. This research represents a key contribution in the F&B context to consolidating the knowledge of strategic communication practices that influence the marketing decision-making process within companies. In particular, in the Italian market, many traditionally managed F&B companies are still lagging in terms of communication. After the Covid-19 pandemic, companies still allocate limited budgets to marketing and communication departments. Professionals who operate in these business areas, therefore, face challenges in developing digital communication campaigns (Harvard Business Review Italia, 2023).

Specifically, it emerged from our analysis that communication managers should embrace meaning-making processes that go beyond the transmission of messages and address appropriate strategies for achieving the organization's strategic objectives (Invernizzi *et al.*, 2009).

The communication departments of companies play an increasingly central role in the marketing decision-making process and are fundamental both for defining product policy and for innovating marketing communication. Communication professionals should focus more on consolidating the relationship between brands and consumers and on identifying new consumers by communicating the product offering, the characteristics of the products that meet their needs, the strategy, and the company approach-i.e., one oriented toward sustainability.

In other words, through concrete actions, both marketing and corporate communication professionals can support effective business strategies in this evolving context and address societal challenges (Colleoni *et al.*, 2022). To date, the companies involved in this study seem to be making a concrete effort to meet the needs and to satisfy the expectations of heterogeneous targets, such as consumers from international markets or from different cultural backgrounds (Crick *et al.*, 2020; Oliveira *et al.*, 2023). The role of the communication professional is crucial in this effort.

6. Conclusions, limitations, and future research directions

This study investigated the role of strategic communication in the marketing decision-making process. It emerged from our analysis that within this process, strategic communication plays a central role in defining product policy and marketing communications strategies. In this regard, the study presented both an original contribution to the academic debate on the topic of strategic communication within companies operating in the Italian context, and useful managerial implications for professionals

and entrepreneurs who deal with communication and marketing in organizations.

However, this research suffers from some limitations, therefore it suggests future research directions in the marketing and strategic communication fields. First, we adopted a qualitative multiple-case study involving five companies operating in the same industry (food and beverage) and market (Italy), thereby limiting the generalizability of the results. Future research could extend the analysis by considering other sectors and countries to investigate the role of strategic communication in the marketing decision-making process. Broadening the sample of companies, including other countries' firms and other industries, to be compared to the Italian F&Bs would increase the generalizability of the results.

Second, our research did not consider the perspective of other external stakeholders-i.e., consumers, partners, industry experts-and their perception of the communication strategies of the analyzed firms. Researchers could therefore, in the future, adopt the theoretical perspective of consumer behavior and psychology and investigate how strategic communication messages influence their decision-making process.

Third, we adopted a qualitative approach, collecting semi-structured interviews with professionals operating in the five case companies. To favor methodological diversity, other qualitative methodologies-i.e., qualitative content analysis or ethnographies-or quantitative research methods-i.e., questionnaires-could be employed in future studies.

Finally, our research did not focus on the evolution of companies' communication strategies over time. Future studies could adopt a longitudinal perspective to analyze the case studies to identify how the role of strategic communication is evolving within organizations.

References

- ANZIVINO A. (2021), *Le imprese e i "nuovi italiani". Strategie di marketing e comunicazione*, Franco Angeli, Milano.
- APPELBAUM U., HALLIBURTON C. (1993), "How to develop international advertising campaigns that work: The example of the European food and beverage sector", *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 12, n. 3, pp. 223-241.
- ARGENTI P.A. (2017), "Strategic communication in the c-suite", *International Journal of Business Communication*, vol. 54, n. 2, pp. 146-160.
- ARGENTI P.A., HOWELL R.A., BECK K.A. (2005), "The strategic communication imperative", *MIT Sloan Management Review*, vol. 46, n. 3, pp. 83-89.
- BAXTER P., JACK S. (2008), "Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers", *The Qualitative Report*, vol. 13, n. 4, pp. 544-559.
- BELYAEVA Z., RUDAWSKA E.D., LOPATKOVA Y. (2020), "Sustainable business model in food and beverage industry-a case of Western and Central and Eastern European countries", *British Food Journal*, vol. 122, n. 5, pp. 1573-1592.

- BESLEY J.C., DUDO A.D., YUAN S., ABI GHANNAM N. (2016), "Qualitative interviews with science communication trainers about communication objectives and goals", *Science Communication*, vol. 38, n. 3, pp. 356-381.
- BÎRĂ M., DABA-BUZOIANU C., DUDUCIUC A., TUDORIE G. (2018), *Exploring Communication Through Qualitative Research* (Eds.), Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne.
- BOTAN C.H. (2018), *Strategic communication theory and practice: The cocreational model*, Hoboken, Wiley Blackwell, New York.
- CECCOTTI F., VERNUCCIO M., MATTIACCI A. (2019), "The evolution of agency-client relationships within the communication network in Italy: the perspective of communication partners", *Sinergie Italian Journal of Management*, vol. 37, n. 3, pp. 63-85.
- COFFELT T. (2017), "Confidentiality and anonymity of participants", Allen M. (Eds), *The SAGE encyclopedia of communication research methods*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks: pp. 227-230.
- COLLEONI E., OLIVIERI M., ROMENTI S., MURTARELLI G. (2022), "'I am impressed by how quickly they changed': The impact of CSR communication initiatives during COVID-19 among millennials in Italy", In Tench R., Meng J., Moreno A. (Eds), *Strategic Communication in a Global Crisis* (pp. 89-111), Routledge, London.
- COLLESEI U. (2012), "The evolution of the communication role in marketing approach", *Sinergie Italian Journal of Management*, vol. 30, pp. 25-32.
- CORBIN J.M., STRAUSS A. (1990), "Grounded theory research: procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria", *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 13, n. 1, pp. 3-21.
- COWART K., WAGNER P. (2021), "An Investigation of Androgyny and Sexual Orientation in Advertising: How Androgynous Imagery and Sexual Orientation Impact Advertisement and Brand Attitudes", *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 61, n. 3, pp. 276-288.
- CRICK J.M., CRICK D., CHAUDHRY S. (2020), "Entrepreneurial marketing decision-making in rapidly internationalising and de-internationalising start-up firms", *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 113, pp. 158-167.
- CUCINO V., FERRIGNO G., CRICK J., PICCALUGA A. (2024), "Identifying entrepreneurial opportunities during crises: a qualitative study of Italian firms", *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, vol. 31, n. 8, pp. 47-76.
- DUBOIS A., GADDE L.E. (2002), "Systematic combining: an abductive approach to case research", *Journal of Business Research*, n. 55, pp. 553-560.
- DURMUSOGLU S.S., ATUAHENE-GIMA K., CALANTONE R.J. (2022), "Marketing strategy decision making in new product development: direct effects and moderation by market information time sensitivity and analyzability", *European Journal of Innovation Management*, In press, pp. 1-30.
- EISEND M., MULDROW A.F., ROSENGREN S. (2023), "Diversity and inclusion in advertising research", *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 42 no. 1, pp. 52-59.
- EISENHARDT K.M., GRAEBNER M.E. (2007), "Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges", *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 50, n. 1, pp. 25-32.
- EISENHARDT K. M. (1989), "Building theories from case study research", *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 14, n. 4, pp. 532-550.

- ENKE N., BORCHERS N.S. (2019), "Social media influencers in strategic communication: A conceptual framework for strategic social media influencer communication", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 13, n. 4, pp. 261-277.
- EY ITALY (2022), *I nuovi orizzonti della comunicazione corporate in Italia: più strategica, più integrata e al passo con il dibattito pubblico*, (Available at: https://www.ey.com/it_it/news/2022-press-releases/12/i-nuovi-orizzonti-della-comunicazione-corporate-in-italia)
- FALAHAT M., RAMAYAH T., SOTO-ACOSTA P., LEE Y.Y. (2020), "SMEs internationalization: The role of product innovation, market intelligence, pricing and marketing communication capabilities as drivers of SMEs' international performance", *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, vol. 152, pp. 1-7.
- FALKHEIMER J. (2014), "The power of strategic communication in organizational development", *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences*, vol. 6, n. 2/3, pp. 124-133.
- FALKHEIMER J., HEIDE M. (2023), *Strategic communication: An introduction to theory and global practice*, Routledge, New York.
- FALKHEIMER J., HEIDE M., NOTHHAFT H., PLATEN S.V., SIMONSSON C., ANDERSSON R. (2017), "Is strategic communication too important to be left to communication professionals?", *Public Relations Review*, vol. 43, n. 1, pp. 91-101.
- FARWELL J. P. (2012), *Persuasion and power: The art of strategic communication*, Georgetown University Press.
- FREBERG K., GRAHAM K., MCGAUGHEY K., FREBERG L.A. (2011), "Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality", *Public Relations Review*, vol. 37, pp. 90-92.
- HALLAHAN K., HOLTZHAUSEN D., VAN RULER B., VERCIC D., SRIRAMESH K. (2007), "Defining strategic communication", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 1, n. 1, pp. 3-35.
- HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ITALIA (2023), "Fare marketing quando il budget è ridotto". (Available at: <https://www.hbritalia.it/homepage/2023/10/11/news/fare-marketing-quando-il-budget-e-ridotto-15680/>)
- HEIDE M., VON PLATEN S., SIMONSSON C., FALKHEIMER J. (2018), "Expanding the scope of strategic communication: Towards a holistic understanding of organizational complexity", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 12, n. 4, pp. 452-468.
- HOLTZHAUSEN D., ZERFASS A. (2015), *The Routledge handbook of strategic communication* (Eds.), Routledge, New York.
- HU L., OLIVIERI M. (2021), "Social media management in the traveller's customer journey: an analysis of the hospitality sector", *Current Issues in Tourism*, vol. 24, n. 12, pp. 1768-1779.
- ILLIA L., ROMENTI S., RODRIGUEZ-CANOVAS B., MURTARELLI G., and CARROLL C. E. (2017), "Exploring corporations' dialogue about CSR in the digital era", *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 146, pp. 39-58.
- INVERNIZZI E. (2002), "La poliedricità della comunicazione per lo sviluppo dell'impresa", *Sinergie Italian Journal of Management*, vol. 20, n. 59, pp. 19-39.
- INVERNIZZI E., ROMENTI S. (2015), "Adopting an entrepreneurial perspective to the study of strategic communication", In Holtzhausen D.R., Zerfass A. (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of strategic communication* (pp. 214-228), Routledge, New York.

- INVERNIZZI E., GAMBETTI R., ROMENTI S. (2009), "Comunicazione, processi decisionali strategici e marketing", *Impresa Progetto-Electronic Journal of Management*, vol. 1, pp. 1-20.
- INVERNIZZI E., ROMENTI S., FUMAGALLI M. (2012), "Identity, communication and change management in Ferrari", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, vol. 17, n. 4, pp. 483-497.
- ISTAT (2023), *Prezzi al consumo (dati provvisori) - ottobre 2023*, (Available at: <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/289993>)
- JARZABKOWSKI P., BALOGUN J., SEIDL D. (2007), "Strategizing: The challenges of a practice perspective", *Human Relations*, vol. 60, pp. 5-27.
- KNUDSEN G.H., LEMMERGAARD J. (2014), "Strategic serendipity: How one organization planned for and took advantage of unexpected communicative opportunities", *Culture and Organization*, vol. 20, n. 5, pp. 392-409.
- KROSNIK J.A., PRESSER S. (2010), 'Question and questionnaire design' P.V. Wright & J.D. Marsden (Eds.), *Handbook of survey research*, Bingley, UK: Emerald, pp. 264-313.
- MACNAMARA J. (2018), "A review of new evaluation models for strategic communication: Progress and gaps", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 12, n. 2, pp. 180-195.
- MASON J. (2002), *Qualitative Researching*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- MERZ M.A., HE Y., VARGO S.L. (2009), "The evolving brand logic: A service-dominant logic perspective", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, vol. 37, n. 3, pp. 328-344.
- NEUMAN W. (1997), *Social research methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches*, Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- NOTHHAFT H. (2016), "A framework for strategic communication research: A call for synthesis and consilience", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 10, n. 2, pp. 69-86.
- O'CONNOR A., SHUMATE M. (2018), "A multidimensional network approach to strategic communication", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 12, n. 4, pp. 399-416.
- OLIVEIRA J., HULTMAN M., BOSO N., HODGKINSON I., HUGHES P., NEMKOVA E., SOUCHON A. (2023), "Decision-making in international marketing: past, present, and future", *International Marketing Review*, In press, pp. 1-17.
- PEKKALA K., ERKKILÄ T. (2024), "Organizational Voicing Architecture in the Age of Social Media-a Case Study in Professional Service Organizations", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 18, n. 4, pp. 366-381.
- PEÑALOZA L. (2018), "Ethnic marketing practice and research at the intersection of market and social development: A macro study of the past and present, with a look to the future", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 82, pp. 273-280.
- REILLY A.H., HYNAN K.A. (2014), "Corporate communication, sustainability, and social media: It's not easy (really) being green", *Business Horizons*, vol. 57 n. 6, pp. 747-758.
- ROMENTI S., INVERNIZZI E. (2011), "Strategic communication and decision-making processes: Toward the communication oriented organisation", *Academicus. International Scientific Journal*, vol. 3, pp. 1-16.

- RUDELOFF C., BEKMEIER-FEUERHAHN S., SIKKENGA J., BARTH A. (2022), "Conditions of one-way and two-way approaches in strategic start-up communication: a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA)", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 16, n. 2, pp. 157-181.
- SANDHU S. (2009), "Strategic communication: An institutional perspective", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 3, n. 2, pp. 72-92.
- SIANO A., VOLLERO A., BERTOLINI A. (2022), "From brand control to brand cocreation: An integrated framework of brand paradigms and emerging brand perspectives", *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 152, pp. 372-386.
- STATISTA (2024), *Food & Drink - Worldwide*, (Available at <https://www.statista.com/outlook/amo/app/food-drink/worldwide>)
- STREBINGER A., GUO X., KLAUSER F., GRANT-HAY P. (2018), "Is multi-ethnic advertising a globally viable strategy for a Western luxury car brand? A mixed-method cross-cultural study", *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 82, pp. 409-416.
- TRIANAFILLIDOU A., YANNAS P. (2024), "Social media management, communication roles, and their effects on communication practitioners' involvement in strategic management of organizations in Greece", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 18, n. 2, pp. 150-166.
- TSENG M.L., SUJANTO R.Y., IRANMANESH M., TAN K., CHIU A.S. (2020), "Sustainable packaged food and beverage consumption transition in Indonesia: Persuasive communication to affect consumer behavior", *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, vol. 161, pp. 1-11.
- VALENTINI C., KRUCKEBERG D., STARCK K. (2012), "Public relations and community: A persistent covenant", *Public Relations Review*, vol. 38, n. 5, pp. 873-879.
- VAN RULER B. (2018), "Communication theory: An underrated pillar on which strategic communication rests", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 12, n. 4, pp. 367-381.
- VOLK S.C., ZERFASS A. (2018), "Alignment: Explicating a key concept in strategic communication", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 12, n. 4, pp. 433-451.
- WERDER K.P., NOTHHAFT H., VERČIČ D., ZERFASS A. (2018), "Strategic communication as an emerging interdisciplinary paradigm", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 12, n. 4, pp. 333-351.
- WINDELS K. (2016), "Stereotypical or just typical: how do US practitioners view the role and function of gender stereotypes in advertisements?", *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 35, n. 5, pp. 864-887.
- WUERSCH L., NEHER A., MALEY J.F., PETER M.K. (2024), "Using a digital internal communication strategy for digital capability development", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 18, n. 3., pp. 167-188.
- YIN R.K. (2013), "Validity and generalization in future case study evaluations", *Evaluation*, vol. 19, n. 3, pp. 321-332.
- YIN R.K. (2009), *Case study research, design and methods*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, California.
- YIN R.K. (1984), *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Sage, 1st ed., Newbury Park, CA.

- YOUNG L., PIETERSON W. (2015), "Strategic communication in a networked world: Integrating network and communication theories in the context of government to citizen communication", In Holtzhausen D.R., Zerfass A. (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of strategic communication* (pp. 117-136), Routledge, New York.
- ZAYER L.T., MCGRATH M.A., CASTRO-GONZALEZ P. (2019), "Men and masculinities in a changing world:(de) legitimizing gender ideals in advertising", *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 54, n. 1, pp. 238-260.
- ZERFASS A., HUCK S. (2007), "Innovation, communication, and leadership: New developments in strategic communication", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 1, n. 2, pp. 107-122.
- ZERFASS A., VERČIČ D., NOTHHAFT H., WERDER K.P. (2018), "Strategic communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and practice", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 12, n. 4, pp. 487-505.

Academic or professional position and contacts

Mirko Olivieri

Postdoc Research Fellow of Marketing
Cattolica del Sacro Cuore University - Italy
e-mail: mirko.olivieri@unicatt.it

Lala Hu

Senior Assistant Professor of Marketing
Cattolica del Sacro Cuore University - Italy
e-mail: lala.hu@unicatt.it

Alessia Anzivino

Assistant Professor of Marketing
Cattolica del Sacro Cuore University - Italy
e-mail: alessia.anzivino@unicatt.it