Show me love

Emergent strategic communication practices and fan engagement within the popular music industry

Jessica Edlom
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For the music industry, audiences’ engagement around music artists is central to building and communicating artist brands. Currently, we are witnessing new communication approaches to track, foster and commodify audience engagement, partly via data-driven processes. This thesis studies how the music industry’s strategic communication practices interplay with and steer audience and fan engagement.

The thesis applies qualitative and ethnographic approaches and socio-cultural perspectives. Drawing on practice and structuration theory, critical questions are asked about the social consequences of communication engagement and an engagement imperative – for both individuals and organisations. Results indicate that the contemporary, digitalised music industry demands communication practices that are at the same time strategic, professionalised, emergent, agile and co-creative. The study highlights implications of such practices, in terms of changing professional competences, ethics and power relations that support and are (re-)produced through the engagement imperative. In sum, the thesis is aimed at extending our understanding of how strategic communication practices respond to, and change in, a seemingly liquid, yet at the same time carefully orchestrated, communicative context.
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Abstract

This thesis studies how the music industry’s strategic communication practices interplay with and steer audience and fan engagement. Relationships with, and expectations on, “active”, “prosuming” or “co-creative” music audiences make it imperative for communication practitioners to produce engagement. The music industry has adapted its promotional strategies accordingly, and data-driven processes and algorithms have become ever more central to understanding and controlling audience and fan practices. Currently, we are witnessing the emergence of new strategic communication approaches to follow, foster, steer, track and commodify audience engagement, via big data.

Applying qualitative and ethnographic approaches and socio-cultural perspectives, the thesis explores how strategic communication practices are enacted and designed to cater for, interplay with and steer audience engagement. Drawing on practice and structuration theory, critical questions are asked about the social consequences of communication engagement and an engagement imperative – for both individuals and organisations involved in the strategic communication around a music brand.

Results indicate that the contemporary, digitalised music industry demands communication practices that are at the same time strategic, professionalised, agile and co-creative. The study highlights important implications of such practices, in terms of changing professional competences and ethics as well as context-specific articulations of the power relations that support and are (re-)produced through the engagement imperative. In sum, the thesis is aimed at extending our understanding of how strategic communication practices respond to, and change in, a seemingly liquid, yet at the same time carefully orchestrated, communicative context.

Keywords: agility, audience engagement, branding, co-creation, communication management, engagement, fandom, liquid, music industry, participation, practice theory, strategic communication, strategy-as-practice, structuration theory
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There was a roar when the Swedish artist Robyn entered a fan-organised tribute dance party (only playing Robyn’s music) in Brooklyn in May 2018. She had been away from the music scene for eight years but still attracted a lot of fans around the world. For Robyn, an active and deeply engaged fan community was a natural place to act from when releasing her new album *Honey* in autumn 2018. The release campaign was launched and monitored by Robyn’s management through inviting and following fan reactions on digital platforms. There were social media messages and videos talking directly to her fans, gamified competitions to win tickets to an exclusive “secret gig”, and so on. The response from the fans was massive: “This has really brightened up my day, my week and my life! We’ve missed you too! Guys, Queen Robyn is BACK” was one of thousands of reactions to a YouTube clip (Missing U – A message to my fans).

Music artists and the music industry are highly dependent on active consumers, audiences and fans – on people listening, liking, loving, following, sharing, engaging and interacting with them, their music and brands. The music industry is also heavily dependent on digital streaming services and social media platforms (Baym, 2012; Choi & Burnes, 2013; van Dijck, 2009), as their networked and interactive structure creates possibilities. A broad range of media formats and cross-platform distribution principles are used by music industry organisations to create engagement among audiences and fans and build relationships with them (see, for example, Brembilla, 2019; Jenkins, 2006; Zwick et al., 2008). The premise that people want to have music in their lives and be creative and social about it means that active, co-creative audiences are sought after and used to foster communication in transmedia marketing campaigns (Zeiser, 2015). Strategic communicators build promotional strategies with coherent communication and marketing narratives of music artists, with the aim of encouraging activity and engagement within campaigns and around the
artist brands, and with the hope that audiences will act as anticipated. The engagement on social platforms is then followed as digital footprints and understood and managed in real time (Brodmerkel & Carah, 2016; Nieborg & Poell, 2018) – audience activities are increasingly datafied (Thompson, 2019), shaped by algorithms (Carah & Angus, 2018) and accelerated (Rosa, 2013). In relation, new communication approaches to follow, measure, foster, control, and commodify the engagement via big data surface and keep surfacing (Andrejevic, 2014; Choi & Burnes, 2013; Gamble & Gilmore, 2013; Zwick et al., 2008), which music organisations have to adjust to. This goes in line with how organisations at large try to handle an ever-changing and data-centric society. Yet, knowledge about emergent communication practice is largely missing both in academia and in organisations, especially in relation to external stakeholder engagement.

This thesis explores the implications of adapting strategic communication to so-called “platformised” engagement flows, for individuals, organisations, as well as the society. I place focus on the strategic communication practices, and the people involved in the practices (both communication practitioners and organisational stakeholders such as audiences and fans). The connection between organisational practice and stakeholder engagement is seen as both a challenge and an area of interest for organisations at large, but also for media and communication fields.

The music industry context is chosen as an example of a networked and both digitally mature and still evolving industry, where communication practices become the central focus in helping adapt to and navigate a complex and fast-paced environment. I study how the music industry’s communication practices react to, cultivate and take advantage of audience and fan engagement1. With a focus on people, practices and processes, I am adopting a socio-cultural perspective on the social consequences of strategic communication practices in relation to engagement, as well as the power relations and negotiations that are formed within this practice. This

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1 The terminology regarding organisations’ communication recipients is rather heterogeneous and dependent on the academic and industrial field. In my thesis, I will mostly use the term stakeholder, audience or fan for what is also called the consumer, customer or user. Stakeholder is used within, for example, organisational and marketing literature for someone that forms a stake in the activities of an organisation (could be an employee, supplier, affected communities, etc., although in this study the stakeholder notion is used to talk about target groups such as audiences, fans, customers, etc.). Audience is used for larger target groups/publics, or assembled groups of listeners/spectators of a performance. Fan is used for the most engaged audiences, and fan community as group of fans forming around a music artist.
positions my thesis work within the growing field of strategic communication interacting with the concept of engagement, using practice theory as a main theoretical lens.

**Organisational strategic communication in times of complexity and liquidity**

In tandem with platformisation and the digital shift, other trends in society like globalisation, marketisation, individualisation, personalisation and innovation have all, in many ways, created new and accelerating conditions for organisations overall. The constant exposure to global and societal trends forces organisations to rethink and restructure their ways of operating, not least the communication practices. There are both opportunities and challenges in business practices, pertaining to changing patterns of communication practices, renegotiated relations between organisations and their external stakeholders, and new facets of stakeholder engagement.

Organisations seek engagement around brands since it serves them well, as long as it reflects positively on the organisation. Engagement is considered central to organisations’ success, by both industry and scholars (see, for example, Foster & Jonker, 2005). It has even been suggested that organisations cannot remain agentic for long if they do not engage with their stakeholders. Related concepts such as collaboration, participation, community, issues management, etc. have arrived to stay and altered organisational practices profoundly (Heath, 2018). These concepts are deeply entangled with the development of digital and social media, as are organisations’ engagement work and relationship building. Social media and streaming platforms are playing a central role in reaching stakeholders, in building relationships with them, and they are also increasing the level and quality of engagement (see, for example, Kietzmann et al., 2011). In terms of communication with practitioners, it is seen as important to constantly enhance the understanding of external stakeholders’ communication preferences via data analysis, and to respond to them with respect and sensitivity.

The use of data-driven practices also creates new contexts for organisational communication. The digital age is referred to as a “game-changer for the communication between organizations and stakeholders” (Lock, 2019, p. 1). The shift in the Internet’s structure, commonly referred to as
platformisation (Negus, 2018; Nieborg & Poell, 2018), the transformation of the Internet, implying a domination of commercial digital platforms (Helmond, 2015) and a social media logic (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), with programmability, popularity, connectivity and datafication as driving forces (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013), have created new frameworks for organisations. There is an interplay between networked technologies, cultural artefacts, and social practices and spaces (boyd, 2010), which organisations benefit from. Social media and new technologies we are carrying with us all the time, has greatly expanded the opportunities for consumers to interact with organisations and their brands. Audiences use and engage with content on digital platforms when they want and where they want it, which make it “largely impossible” for organisations and their practitioners to control communication flows (Grunig, 2009). Although, control has always been somewhat an illusion in communication practice. The question of whether you can control something that seems uncontrollable is central for organisations. Yet, control is sought for, which has different implications.

From a communication perspective, organisations are perceived as constantly reacting and relating to the environment and therefore changing. This line of reasoning is rooted in the perspective of CCO (Communication Constitutes Organizations; see, for example, Brummans et al., 2014; Putnam & Nicotera, 2010). An organisation is to be understood as a processual and emergent phenomenon (Coupland & Brown, 2004) that is socially constructed in words and actions. CCO scholarship focuses on communication events on the micro level (Schoeneborn & Vásquez, 2017). Communication is also seen as a joint activity where actors (both speakers and addressees) co-produce, moment by moment, an understanding of their social relations and joint understanding (see, for example, Tuomela, 2002). Therefore, in this view, communication is inherently relational and performative and used to understand and connect to a complex surrounding.

The relationships within the organisation, as well as between the organisation and stakeholders, are seen as dynamic, and temporary – something that arises through communication and negotiation (Cheney et al., 2010). Relationships are also seen as social networks (see, for example, Borgatti & Lopez-Kidwell, 2011) based on communicative interaction between units of different sorts, with more or less strong ties between their actors. Relatedly, Gulbrandsen and Just (2016b) argue that we should
understand organisations as fluid networks that change in relation to situations and contexts, which also adds to the complexity of organisational practice.

Organisations are becoming more fluid forms (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015) with blurred boundaries both within and outside them (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2014). Similarly, theorists like Zygmunt Bauman (2000) and Anthony Giddens (1990) proposed, long before social media and digital platforms, that the postmodern society as a whole is marked by increased levels of mobility and liquidity. With digital platforms and solutions, the society has become even more in a state of constant motion, becoming hypermodern (Lipovetsky & Charles, 2005), in responding to a VUCA world (a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment; see Hurth, 2017).

Such conditions are considered to make anticipation difficult or even impossible, but also highlight the importance of strategic action and planning in organisations (Mack et al., 2015). Even if demanding environments are not new to organisations (see, for example, Burns & Stalker, 1961; Senge, 1990; Volberda, 1997; Weick, 1995), the speed and complexity of the early twenty-first century is without comparison. Organisations today therefore struggle with what is called “ambidexterity”, which refers to the tension but also the ability to both “explore and exploit” – for example, to compete in both mature and new technologies and markets with efficiency, improvement and control, as well as flexibility, autonomy and experimentation (see, for example, Berger-Tai et al., 2014; O’Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

Organisations today are urged to constantly keep mapping their environments, the society and their external stakeholders (Ihlen, 2008), and to adopt new strategic, but also reflexive and reflective practices (Falkheimer, 2009; Holmström, 2010). Strategic communication practices are increasingly seen as central to assisting and equipping the organisation in confronting, responding and adapting to the challenges and uncertainties of the world and its operating social environment (Argenti et al., 2005; Hallahan et al., 2007; Johnston, 2014). Thinking and working strategically has been generally promoted for at least the last 30 years as a desirable way of doing and managing communication practices (see, for example, Dozier et al., 1995; Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Hallahan et al., 2007; Simcic Brønn, 2001; Tibbie, 1997). Organisations are in fact increasingly taking a unified approach to all sorts of deliberate and strategic
communication practices (public relations (PR), marketing and communication management), engaging in “conversations of strategic significance to its goals” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493). This is accomplished partly through purposeful actions (Verhoeven et al., 2011) but also by flexible, iterative, responsive and emergent processes and structures (Van Ruler, 2015, 2018; Wiencierz et al., 2021; Zerfass et al., 2018), and partly by having a high degree of interconnectedness, i.e. relationship building with stakeholder groups. One central goal is to build organisational image, but also to conform to social expectations – to constantly make the external stakeholders see the organisations as legitimate, ethical and successful (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2015).

It is key for organisations to strategically steer, align and integrate their communication in order to reach their stakeholders in anticipated ways (Hallahan et al., 2007). Traditional communication activities have given way to a vast number of new methods that organisations use to communicate directly with, and influence, stakeholders. Different communication disciplines and professional fields (like communication management, marketing, PR, branding, technical communication, and political communication) that previously were separate and had separate goals now share common strategies and purposes (Hallahan, 2004). There is more that unites different communication fields today than separates them, due to the social, cultural, political-economic and technical changes. These fields may have different tactics and techniques and are often practised by different personnel within larger organisations, addressing particular organisational purposes. Nevertheless, they have similar overall objectives: to create “understanding, durable relations, and a common identity” (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018, p. 57) – and to create engagement and participation around their offerings. Strategic communication and engagement, then, are deeply intertwined, although voices are raised that “an effective communication strategy is likely to be almost the exact opposite of an effective engagement strategy” (Di Maio, 2010, para. 7), as the former chooses and controls content, channels etc. and the latter joins others’ conversations.

In this thesis, I study how strategic communication practices assist organisations in manoeuvring the new communicational conditions and relations, more specifically how communication practices are adjusted to, and integrated with, stakeholder engagement. For organisations, there is a tension between trying to encourage, follow and understand an active
audience on the one hand, and trying to strategically steer them to act in anticipated ways within communication campaigns and branding on the other. This can in both cases be challenging – the fast and often chaotic pace of the digital landscape demands constant changes and openness. It calls for flexibility and at the same time constant learning from the organisation. Communication practitioners are part of a system and within it simultaneously play different roles – as power agents, directing debates and cultures, but also as workers acting according to norms and demands. I argue that highlighting and asking critical questions about the consequences of highly data-centric strategic communication practices on an individual, social and societal level can bring insights not only to the academic field of strategic communication, but also to communication practices.

**Setting the scene: the platformised and engaging music brand**

To study how strategic communication interplays with stakeholder engagement, I have chosen the popular music industry as an illustrative example of contemporary communication practices and the challenges that are prominent in this regard for organisations at large.

In recent decades, the music industry has been undergoing dramatic changes in the production, distribution and consumption of music. It has been profoundly adapted to the digital media landscape. In the old music economy, focus was on market flows of music and the control of intellectual property. During the twentieth century, the music industry was moulded by technological and societal developments, such as broadcast media, marketisation, rock ‘n’ roll and consolidation of music firms into a few multinational companies controlling a big part of the global music market. Despite initially being reactive to the digital shift, the music industry became early adopters of digital solutions and platforms (Wikström, 2020) and adjusted to the affordances of the social web.

In the new music economy, physical music distribution and use of mass media are radically reduced, and the Internet has created totally new structures. Music organisations are today at the forefront of using this digital setting in relation to their customers. Connectivity between music companies and external stakeholders such as audiences and between audiences, has increased considerably (Wikström, 2020). Yet, with a decrease in control of the flows of information. Technology has also opened up new entrepreneurial aspects of the industry (Morris, 2014; Wikström,
2020): “everyone” with a computer can record songs, put them out online and reach audiences.

What signifies music and the music industry? Music is a cultural and a social phenomenon and represents something central in many people’s lives. People consume music on a daily basis, are passionate about it, identify themselves with it and share experiences of it with others. Music represents art and artefacts, as well as products or commodities in a market. Here, communication and marketing represent ways of facilitating exchanges within the market for organisations and build enduring relationships with consumers to reach organisational goals. Negus (1992) describes the core of the music industry as being about “developing musical content and personalities” – differentiating and spreading music artists as brands. The music brands are central, intangible and legal assets to the music industry.

Both Holt (2004) and O’Reilly et al. (2013) argue that it is important to consider the cultural context of branding, and the social interaction between the stakeholders, and I agree. From a sociological perspective, a brand is seen as a socio-symbolic space, object or even platform that favours interactions between many different types of actors (organisations, communicators, consumers, etc.) (Lury, 2004). People relate to brands, and to other people, through expressions of sentiment like passion, commitment and intimacy (Fournier, 1998) – they act as affective publics (Papacharissi, 2016). The cultural practice of music brings music brands meaning and the meanings of brands are also continually constructed, experienced and negotiated among everyone involved. In this thesis, I am using both a cultural and a social lens on music brands, as well as the commercial marketing perspective.

Though substantial parts of the music industry have changed, many of the prerequisites remain the same. Popular music is a highly commercialised and branded cultural field. More than 80 years ago, Adorno (1938/1991b, 1991a) argued that the production and consumption of culture in capitalist societies are inevitably standardised for the industry in order to cater for audience expectations and tastes. In the 1980s, both the collaboration between Michael Jackson and Pepsi-Cola in and marketing campaigns for Madonna can be seen as landmarks for how popular music and advertising became more and more entangled (Love-Tulloch, 2012). The rise of the music channel MTV in the 80s also helped in innovative ways
the spreading of commercial music via music videos, and corporations and musicians began to realize, for example, the benefits of incorporating songs into commercials and of co-branding. This repositioned the boundaries between corporate and artistic industries, and it keeps pushing boundaries today.

Today’s prevailing commercial discourse of the music market makes it necessary to turn an artist into a brand that needs to be managed strategically, as it is seen as core asset to be used in all kinds of platforms and places. It has become normal for music-makers in general to operate in an inherently commercial, promotional and digital environment. The music industry uses social and digital platforms and algorithms at a very high level (Burkart & Leijonhufvud, 2019; Choi & Burnes, 2013; Hepworth-Sawyer et al., 2019) for digitally sharing, distributing and promoting music and music artists (Gamble & Gilmore, 2013; Gamble et al., 2019; Negus, 2018; Wikström, 2020; Wlömert & Papes; 2016).

The music industry of today “consists of those companies concerned with developing music content and personalities which can be communicated across multiple media” (Wikström, 2020, p. 52). The industry, according to Hesmondhalgh (2002, p. 12), is made up of three parts: recording, publishing and live performance. It presents a rather new and complex ecosystem of networks of creativity, reproduction, distribution and consumption (Leyshon, 2001). There are many different interacting actors besides the record companies and the platforms; producers, music publishers, managers, and other supporting roles and actors. In the centre, of course, is the musician/artist/ group/songwriter – the heart and soul of the music industry. Without the artist there would be no music and no industry. Around and in connection with the music artist brand, there are a number of key players. The communication system around the music artists consists of a complex network of agents; management, record company, the artists and repertoire representatives (A&R), communicators, marketers, creatives, data analysts and external PR, advertising and different types of media consultants, etc.

Murphy and Hume (2023) suggest a networked ecosystem understanding of the music business and marketing, with a focus on independent artists who run Artist direct to consumer business models. Their models of the music industry ecosystem resonate with my view, although my focus is communication practices, including music companies such as record labels.
and management. This model builds on Murphy and Hume’s model, but it has been adapted to my understanding and take of the music industry:

**Figure 1.** Model of music communication ecosystem. Adapted from Models of the new digital music marketing ecosystem by Murphy and Hume (2023).

One central stakeholder and type of key player in this ecosystem is the audience. Without audiences, no one is listening and there is no audience action. The music business is dependent on “the artist’s abilities to attract the audience’s attention and enthusiasm”, as Wikström puts it (2013, p. 93). The digital and social platforms provide new opportunities for music artists and audiences to “come closer” to one another, at least in theory. Music artists and the music industry at large connecting and interacting with audiences and with fan cultures (Jenkins, 2006) is also a focus of my thesis. Initially, the Internet allowed artists and audiences to bypass the traditional music label industry, sharing content at little or no cost and thus rupturing
the music industry’s business model (Wikström, 2020). Even if there were many endeavours to control this bypassing (piracy, bottom-up solutions and fan creativity), the music industry has also changed accordingly, for example in adapting its promotional strategy to take advantage of the platform-based transmedia landscape (Scolari, 2009; Zeiser, 2015) and its interconnectedness, where media content and narratives can easily be spread across platforms (Jenkins, 2006).

The digital platforms provide a space for story worlds to be coherently and simultaneously communicated across multiple media platforms, such as social media, games, films, print, radio and so on, generating both cultural and economic value to music industry organisations (Brembilla, 2019; Jenkins, 2006). The migration of content from one medium to another is supposed to engage audiences in an “immersive experience” (Zeiser, 2015, p. 14). Transmedia storytelling is built to create reactions and to stimulate communication about a brand across platforms. The platforms also provide spaces for all kinds of music artists, including independent and “small” artists, to share, present and sell their work, as well as interacting with fans.

As earlier stated, connections with audiences have been radically changed within the new music landscape. Previously there was a relatively high connectivity between music company and audience, but weak connections among audiences. The Internet has enabled audiences and more engaged fans to connect, share and co-create with each other. The conditions of social media make never-ending interactions that generate an everyday sense of personal connection possible. Audiences therefore “expect artists to be constantly available to them, offering unique, personal glimpses of offstage life. They see musicians as friends”, according to Baym (2018, p. 171). The social web is a networked information economy which, it is claimed, harnesses collective intelligence, encourages human creativity and promotes participation (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2013; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). For Jenkins, the web is a place of consumer participation (2006), where consumers play an active role in spreading, negotiating, remixing and co-creating content through web platforms.

This participation, also framed as engagement, can be captured and commodified, by organisations. Media transform content and audiences’ actions into data through processes of metrification, which provides tools
for harvesting, analysing and profiting on data streams through networked digital platforms (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013). This, in turn, enables commercial organisations to monitor, try to control and exploit audience engagement (Vesnic-Alujevic et al., 2018). What is known as “fan culture” is what the media and music industry often call “user-generated” or “co-created content”. Users make the content, and the industry makes the profit (Jenkins, 2009). Igniting and maintaining discourses of engagement, participation and co-creation is serving the music industry and organisations at large.

Hence, while there is monetary and marketing potential in engaging audiences for organisations, this carries social and cultural implications. With regard to the advent of social media, Nieborg and Poell (2018) argue that cultural expressions such as engagement have become a contingent cultural commodity. Applying their argument to the contemporary music industry, we may say that music consumption and engagement has become a commodity that depends on the social media platform logic, and which is inherently moulded by the platforms’ infrastructural conditions (see also Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Prey, 2020).

Engagement as strategic asset and site of negotiation for music organisations
As argued above, the digital shift has created new conditions for the music industry regarding communication and marketing approaches with relationship building and engagement in focus (Gamble & Gilmore, 2013; Gamble et al., 2019; Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Oestreicher & Kuzma, 2009; Ogden et al., 2011; Vaccaro & Cohn, 2004). By strategically using the digital platform infrastructure, the music industry has developed sophisticated methods for interacting with audiences and ultimately for increasing engagement and building brands using fandom as a marketing device. Before the Internet communication and marketing centred on record releases and concerts in a rather linear way via traditional mass media (Ogden et al., 2011). At the end of the twentieth century, marketing began to focus more on relational aspects and more on customers than on products, which arrived in tandem with digital development. Relatedly, the music industry today is considered to have a high level of consumer interaction (Gamble & Gilmore, 2013) and is deeply dependent on social media to engage with the audiences, consumers and fan
communities, which have taken and been given increasingly active roles in the communication processes. This is partly due to technology, but also consumers’ alleged desire to be interactive (Gamble & Gilmore, 2013) and resistance to marketing controls (Fransen et al., 2015). This is also in line with the changed status of consumers in the economy, from passive to active agents (Graeber, 2011), following neoliberal rationalities, reflecting a rhetoric of consumers as rational decision-makers and being linked to society through their consumer choice. In this regard, the driver of the consumer to engage with, and “invest” in, a music brand seems to be, besides being interested in the music itself, a feeling of participation and inclusion (Salo et al., 2013).

Here, the deeply engaged music audience – the fan – becomes central to the music industry. A fan differs from ordinary music consumers and audiences by being much more active and emotionally attached to their object of desire, by paying greater attention to detail, being more knowledgeable, and becoming an integral part of the experience and the community around the artist (Baym, 2018; Duffett, 2013; Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992, 2006; O’Reilly et al., 2013). Social interaction is essential in fandom. When acting collectively around their object of interest fans become a significant power in the music industry – speaking with a unified voice and acting collaboratively, in a coordinated manner. The interest in engaging and being creative around their object of interest, and the urge to do so, are inherent to being a fan. Therefore, fans co-creation also lie at the core of any brand communication strategy; as Baym (2018) concludes. It is central to how fans interconnect and engage with and around their favourite artists. In other words, both co-creation proponents and critics admit that there are clear benefits from inviting consumers to engage and be co-creators around brands and products (see, for example, Baym, 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The prevailing perspective of consumers, audiences and fans as active, co-creative and as a consequence possibly empowered serves the needs of the industry (Brodmerkel & Carah, 2016).

The supposedly engaged and empowered audiences in regard to brands are paradoxical, though. As noted by Brodmerkel and Carah, the consumer can be seen as “free to act, but only within the parameters set by advertisers” (2016, p. 48). Platforms make certain types of engagement, participation and co-creation possible, but the music industry also makes use of these platforms and the data produced by the engagement. Engagement data are
processed and analysed in order to understand, to segment audiences and to target them with personalised promotional messages (Andrejevic, 2014; Zwick & Knott, 2009). Brodmerkel and Carah (2016, p. xiii) call this a calculative culture: an “algorithmic brokering of attention and processing for participation employed by media platforms for calculating, structuring and coordinating the active” and “empowered” audience. Indeed, the industry express a view of audiences as empowered – able to resist instrumental marketing appeals and not possible to “fool and push around” (Hood, 2005, p. 123).

At the same time, for an organisation and their communication practitioners, audience engagement also represents uncertainty. Certain types of engagement are anticipated and sought, but it is not always possible to steer the people’s reactions and activities. Nevertheless, organisations seem to be doing exactly this: trying to guide, discipline and negotiate with their target groups to react according to plan. Both engagement and control strategies are required for music organisations. Despite being a significantly “open-ended” object (Lury, 2004, p. 151), the brand itself can be seen as a pre-structured space in which certain forms of consumer activity are anticipated and others not (Arvidsson, 2006; Fast, 2012). In relation, Morley (2006, p. 115) argued that we should not “mistake audience activity for power” and that “the consumer’s ability to choose options from within a present menu is a very limited form for power, compared to that of the institutions that construct those menus”.

To handle the organisational challenges, the brand should therefore adopt an always-on strategy, following what the audiences are doing and expressing in real time (Brodmerkel & Carah, 2016). Communication and marketing, are highly organised around data-driven processes and adapted both to the user-driven/engagement focus and the data that engagement produces, which is looped back into strategic considerations. Both campaigns and their contents are continuously reworked and optimised, informed by datafied audience feedback. This kind of metrics focus is becoming fundamental and even normal for many types of organisational decisions (see, for example Tenor, 2023, on journalistic work in newsrooms). However, even if the collected data are potentially rich, they don’t give an especially “full” image of the person behind the numbers, why he/she reacted in a certain way, or is going to react to the next marketing message. Nevertheless, the music industry seems to cling to the possibilities
of insights that big data can provide, to understand and control the engagement flows that have been so much searched for and strategically adapted to. This tension between encouraging engagement around music artists and at the same time trying to steer it according to plan is the focus of this thesis.

Point of departure – the research gap and contribution
This thesis engages in conversations with, and contributes to, the research field of strategic communication in relation to input from an increasingly complex outside world – how strategic communication practices produce, interplay with and adjust to organisational stakeholder engagement. Within my studies I am addressing certain research gaps and responding to certain calls for research within the field of media and communication, audience engagement, organisational studies and creative industry studies (such as the music industry).

First, this thesis contributes to the body of research that strives to broaden the understanding of strategic communication as an emerging communicative practice, in relation to stakeholder engagement. Although traditional research in the strategy field overall tends to remain on a macro or meso level (Falkhemier & Heide, 2018; Sandhu, 2009), there has been a move during the 2000s towards a micro-level approach, studying human aspects and activities. Building on practice theory, I seek to contribute to the hitherto insufficient scientific discussion about the importance of emergence in strategic communication. More specifically, this means that I seek to understand how strategy is carried out in practice, a practice focused on creating, monitoring, adjusting to and controlling engagement. There is an expressed lack of understanding promotional practices (Brodmerkel & Carah, 2016; Valentini, 2015) and how organisations and communication practitioners manage opposing demands and the fluidity of changing and responding contexts (Asunta, 2016; Edwards, 2018; Falkheimer & Heide, 2018; Heide et al., 2018; Zerfass et al., 2014). To explore a dynamic environment, Volk and Zerfass (2018) recommend adopting a practice perspective, perceiving strategy as something organisations do rather than something that they have (Golsorkhi et al., 2015; Jarzabkowski, 2005). There are some implications of doing strategy, for example how to not steer in an ad hoc manner or not as an after-construction. There is a potential conflict between calculated strategy work and liquid practice, tying into
empirical research gaps on how organisations, and communication practitioners in particular, adjust their practices to input from the environment (as discussed by, for example, Falkheimer & Heide, 2018 and Van Ruler, 2019), but relating to strategy. This thesis responds to these gaps and contributes to the understanding of fluidity and so-called agility within strategic communication in relation to stakeholder engagement.

Through being attentive to the relation between strategic communication and audience engagement, the thesis thereby also opens up a more critical discussion on stakeholders’ role within, and influence on, strategic communication, which previous research in strategic communication has mainly neglected. Although consumer and audience engagement are well researched (see, for example, Barger et al., 2016; Broersma, 2019; Steensen et al., 2020), the same cannot be said about the relation between communication and engagement – the consequences of engagement for communication and vice versa.

Second, the thesis contributes expanded knowledge on experiences of promotional cultures and engagement in relation to communication, called for by, among others, Johnston and Taylor (2018). In my view, to get such an understanding, there is a need to speak to people involved within the communication practices – the communication practitioners and other employees involved in communication and branding – about how they experience and relate to their work and work relations. Jarzabkowski (2005, p. 3) calls for exploring the “messy realities of doing strategy as lived experience and to go inside the world of strategy practitioners as they struggle with competing priorities, multiple stakeholders” and the outside world. Edwards (2018), among others, points out the lack of scholarship on strategic communication practitioners as reflexive subjects – that the practitioners as cultural intermediaries take up or reject meaning and norms in their communication practice, and why. Brodmerkel and Carah (2016) also discuss the need to pay more attention to how datafied and algorithmic use influences communication practices. By following communication professionnals within the music industry, the vital yet underexplored tension of dynamic strategic communication practice between staying in control and following active and co-creating audiences online is explored – as is how the practitioners experience these new work settings, and related responsibilities, work roles and identities.
If we accept that communication and branding is a process that involves multiple stakeholders, which I do, then we need to also inquire the external organisational stakeholders such as audiences and fans. While there are extensive studies on audiences (see, for example, Abercombie & Longhurst, 1998; Longhurst, 2007; Napoli, 2011), customers (see, for example, Gentile et al., 2007) and fandom (see, for example, Duffett, 2013; Holt, 2004), there is a lack of knowledge about their perspectives and experiences of being part of promotional settings. Questions of experiences, motivations, expectations, morals, power structures, etc. are often left out when approaching them (as argued by, for example, Fuchs & Qui, 2018; Hao, 2020; Ytre-Arne & Das, 2019), as are their lived experience and voices. Instead, there is an excessive focus on data flows and analysis of digital traces (Schrøder, 2014, 2019; Vesnic-Alujevic et al., 2018). In a system that emphasises strategies built on data traces of stakeholder engagement, much of the importance of deeper insights into people and environments is stripped away. I therefore argue for the need to speak not only with the practitioners but also to the audiences and fans to understand their experiences of engaging around organisational brands overall, and more specifically around music artist brands.

Third, digital and social platforms have in many ways altered the relationships between the music companies, the artists and the music audiences, and the structures these actors are within and commonly forming. For organisations overall, as well as for marketeers and communication practitioners, it could be useful to consider aspects of fan rituals, as well as ethical and ideological dimensions of fandom, instead of only focusing on exchange relationships and ideal flows (O’Reilly et al., 2013). However, the fandom focus comes with certain implications. Johnston and Taylor (2018), for example, believe that it is important to challenge the positive framings of engagement outcomes, for both scholarship and practice. For example, research on consumers and fans within the music industry has been conducted by Gamble et al. (2019), among others, on how co-creation and so-called “user-centric innovation” (UCI) has altered industry practices and marketing strategies in positive directions. At the same time, the flip side of involving audiences in co-creation and using their engagement as a driving force within communication, represents a kind of power exercised by the organisations, those with access to databases and the data-mining expertise (and the platforms), according to Andrejevic (2014). Therefore, there is also
a need for critical investigation of commercial and political interests in audiences’ attention to, and productive work around, brands. It is important to look for forces behind, and processes of, the co-option in order to ensure a nuanced understanding of the risks and vulnerabilities of organisations and media’s power and ideological influence on, and exploitation of, audiences (Livingstone, 2018; Ytre-Arne & Das, 2019)

Along similar lines, Das (2018) argues that there is also a need to move toward acknowledging the roles, responsibilities and power relations of all those involved in industry practices. I agree that these relations need specific attention, and specifically within the music industry. While a growing body of research on consumption, distribution, marketing and power relations within the music industry focuses on, for example, music events and music streaming services (i.e. Barna, 2017; Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Eriksson et al., 2019; Hagen, 2016; Kjus, 2016; Maasø & Hagen, 2020; Prey, 2020), research focusing on the strategic communication practices and relationships within the music industry is missing. O’Reilly et al. (2013, p. 23) agree on this, pointing out that although there is a “multitude of different and important relationships” between the actors of the music industry, most are not yet well understood in the scholarly literature.

Pointing out research gaps regarding practices, experiences and relationships within strategic communication has led me to embark on a qualitative exploration of individual, social and cultural aspects of the field, a field that has traditionally been more focused on managerial and functionalistic aspects. Over the last few decades, there has been a small but growing number of theorists within strategic communication that have moved towards a more holistic view of the social and cultural dynamics within which organisations, practitioners and stakeholders exist. For example, Elmer (2011), Edwards (2018), Heide et al. (2018) and Kiesenbauer and Zerfass (2015) have pressed for a more complex view of strategic communication practice and its societal influences – what is sometimes described as a socio-cultural view. This view is interested in the pervasiveness of promotional practices in society and daily life, and the ways in which strategic communication is both shaped by the cultures in which it operates and intervenes in society beyond the organisational context. Analyses should focus on revealing the wider social and cultural consequences of strategic communication; for example how organisations relate themselves to the public arena or society at large, as well as negotiation around
knowledge, and to power structures (e.g. Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2015). Communication practices, processes and professional cultures should be analysed in relation to the environment in which they are produced, according to Edwards and Hodges (2011). Relatedly, analyses should reveal social and cultural consequences that organisational objectives might have for all the social actors (Edwards, 2018).

Additionally, to understand more complex societal phenomena, Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2021) argue for more qualitative studies on strategic communication that observes non-linear processes. A more reflexive epistemological approach to research is also suggested, to become “even more intellectually expansive, [and] more critically reflective” (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p. 179). With this in mind, to understand and to problematise practices and processes that permeate and shape the communication practice as well as the contemporary society, a socio-cultural and critical view of strategic communication is the direction for my thesis.

In sum, in this thesis, I address research gaps within the field of strategic communication of how communication practices interplay with external stakeholder engagement, with socio-cultural aspects in focus. In doing this, I also shed light more specifically on music industry communication practices and involvement with and adjustment to audience and fan engagement.

**Aim of the thesis**

This thesis incorporates the idea that it is important to keep investigating different aspects of emergent strategic communication practices. I argue that the dynamic environment that organisations are in, in relation to the requirement of the communication practitioners to produce engagement and to use calculative data to understand the engagement, supposedly affects the actual strategic communication practices. When engagement is used as a lever for strategic communication’s goal reaching, i.e. enhancing the exposure and effects of the communication work without investing more, it supposedly affects these practices. The overall aim of the thesis is therefore to critically examine strategic communication practices in relation to audience and fan engagement within the music industry.

Theoretically, this thesis integrates the fields of strategic communication and practice theory in relation to the concept of engagement. My empirical focus is on how strategic communication practices are designed,
enacted and adjusted to cater to fan engagement, and interactions between communication practitioners and music fans within these practices. I examine whether the requirement to work with engagement has implications for the practices on a personal, social and organisational level. My proposition is that there are tensions that are underexplored, yet vital, between a dynamic communication practice that tries to stay in control and active and co-creating audiences. Connected to this also are contrasting perspectives regarding strategy: a more traditional and linear strategic communication and a more emergent and fluid one. There are also, as I see it, tensions between promotional and participatory cultures, as well as between the focus on quantitative data versus “soft” content creation, sensemaking and relations in communication practices, that merit exploring further.

In sum, I hope to create a deeper understanding of contemporary strategic communication practices within the music industry, the actors involved and the structures they are within, and more specifically: 1) how strategic communication practices of the music industry interplay with, are adjusted to and control audience and fan engagement; 2) what the experiences of, and consequences for, the actors are; and 3) what kind of negotiations and power relations takes place between them.

**Research questions**

To achieve the overarching aim of this thesis, the following three research questions will be investigated. As my thesis is article-based, I am also asking more questions in the articles of this thesis.

1. *How are strategic communication practices enacted and designed to cater for, interplay with and steer audience and fan engagement within the popular music industry?*

This overarching research question focuses on the first presented research gap: how the contemporary popular music industry adapts its strategic communication practices to audience engagement. I intend to enable an understanding of how expectations of audiences’ and fans’ engagement serve the strategic communication work. I explore how audiences are steered through transmedia marketing campaigns, and at the same time challenge the organisational strategic endeavours. In this regard, I also
discuss aspects of communication practitioner competences, roles, responsibilities, ethics and the tension between strategy building and authentic communication and fandom. This research question is investigated in all of the articles of this thesis in different aspects (see page 27 for a brief introduction, or the Appendix for the whole articles).

2. *How do the actors within strategic communication ecosystems, such as communication practitioners, audiences and fans, experience engagement and engagement work around a music artist brand?*

The second research question is twofold. First, it aims to contribute an understanding of how the requirement to create audience engagement affects the communication practitioners, as well as how communication practitioners experience their work conditions. The question is partly studied in the third article, which taps into a discussion on having a more personal and socio-cultural view of strategic communication – to understand the actors’ experiences of promotional communication work. Therefore I am also studying the experiences of being a fan in a promotional music brand context. Previous research has predominately approached either the brand’s use of fan activity or the fandom itself. In Article 4, I combine the two and contribute with the fan perspective on, and experience of, taking part in a strategised music market. This is an important contribution to the more industrial and organisational focus in the previous research question.

3. *What kind of power relationships and negotiations develop and take place in a networked music communication ecosystem that is predominately producing and exploiting audience and fan engagement?*

The last research question investigates the social and cultural consequences of promotional strategic work within the music industry – the networks, power relations and negotiations between the actors involved (primarily on communication practitioners and audiences/fans). This research question underpins all of the five articles – which in different ways ask questions about relations and negotiations between the different actors within the communication system of the music industry. This is also an overall focus for this kappa of the thesis, which aims to deepen our understanding of the
consequences of engagement requirements placed on strategic communication practices, practitioners and audiences at large.

**Short overview of the appended papers**

Here, summaries of the five appended papers of the thesis are presented in short form. This part provides an overview of the papers and the main contributions in each paper. The articles discuss how the music industry uses strategic communication and marketing to build engagement and how the communication strategies and practices, and communication practitioners, are affected by the centrality of, and requirements to create, engagement among audiences and fans, as well as how the communication efforts are received/experienced by fans. Subsequently, the contributions in the papers are discussed in relation both to each other and to the overall aim of the thesis. Within the articles, additional and deepening research questions are also asked.

Three of the articles were co-authored in different ways with colleagues within the research project MECO, namely Jenny Karlsson, Linda Ryan Bengtsson and Per Skålén. For Article 1, Ryan Bengtsson was the lead author, with the main responsibility for the conceptualisation, but all the data gathering, methodology, analysis and writing were done by us jointly. For Article 2, I was the lead writer, and I was responsible for the conceptualisation, some of the interviews, formal analysis and most of the writing. Skålén was responsible for the participatory observations and contributed to the writing in the later stages. Article 3 and Chapter 5 were single authored by me. Article 4 was co-written with Karlsson (with me as the lead writer). We were both involved in the ideation, methodology and writing of the article.
This article examines how the popular music industry promotes engagement across social media platforms and music streaming services. In this study, we set out to examine strategic communication practices and more specifically map how a campaign is constructed and in what ways it mobilises engagement across multiple platforms. We examined how such a promotional transmedia campaign unfolds by using the release of Taylor Swift’s album *Reputation* as an illustrative case. A campaign allows an empirical examination of its actions for engagement relying on the activation of fans across multiple media platforms. Swift is an established artist with a track record of several international hits and records and an established social media fan base, the so-called “Swifties”. The campaign was mapped using digital ethnography, capturing the strategic actions taken to engage fans and how fans responded to these engagement efforts.

The study demonstrates how strategically curated activities within a communication and marketing campaign encompass platforms’ affordances and industry events by making use of fan engagement across different social media platforms. The article also engages with fan co-creation and negotiations within the campaign, but also resistance from the fans, which leads to demands for improvisation from the communicator perspective. Nevertheless, fans are more or less directed across platforms along paths to follow, as well as the crossroads of digital and physical spaces through defined activities at specific times. This article proposes the concept of *choreographed engagement* to specifically address temporal and spatial aspects of transmedia marketing at the intersection of platform logic, algorithm economy, storytelling and fan engagement. Choreographed engagement constitutes a significant aspect of the commodification of participation, thus expanding the vocabulary used in the debate on the commodification of culture and audience engagement in the platform era.
Article 2: Agile, co-creative, and data-driven: Multifaceted and emerging strategic communication practices within the Scandinavian music industry.

Submitted February 14 2023 to a special issue of Journal of Communication Management: EUPRERA 2022 – Rethinking the impact of communication risk societies. Co-authored with Per Skålén, Karlstad University.

The purpose of this study is to explore how strategic communication practices within the music industry are performed, and adjusted to audience engagement, as well as to examine how communication practitioners manage liquid and dynamic contexts and relationships. The paper is based on participant observations of a Scandinavian music label and its communication work as well as interviews with its personnel, and additional qualitative interviews with actors from the music industry (record company representatives working with management, branding and communication, as well as external PR consultants and music artists).

At all levels of professionalisation within the industry, solid communication strategies for the artist’s brand are considered a necessity to help steer it in the right direction. The strategies tend to be collaboratively formulated, executed and practised through narratives, paths and activities for the audience to follow and interact with, internal and external meetings, data gathering and monitoring, and “listening” to understand when to alter the strategic efforts and remain liquid and agile. The study enhances the understanding of how emergent and agile strategic communication practices are affected by data-centric audience engagement use – with shorter, more flexible processes and strategies, yet insufficient time for reflection and learning.

The study suggests that the music industry is characterised by ambivalent strategic communication following the “strategicness” within the whole process of communication as well as the relationship between the actors and actions at the same time. The study illustrates that complexities and digitalisation demand communication and marketing practices that are at the same time strategic, professionalised, agile and co-creative. There are tensions between the organisation’s internal strategising and being open to interaction and co-creation with the environment. In particular, this study has shown that music professionals perceive it as a challenge to encourage, follow, understand and adjust to an active audience on the one hand, and to
strategically steer them to act in anticipated ways around brands on the other.

**Article 3: The engagement imperative: Insight into communication practitioners’ experiences of communication work in the music industry.**

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In this study I aimed to contribute with an understanding of how participatory cultural norms are becoming standard in strategic communication, and how this affects communication practitioners and their work. The study does not examine the actual communication practice, but experiences of it. The study is based on 18 interviews with communication practitioners in the music industry as well as on the qualitative text analysis of material such as reports and weekly newsletters from the music marketing firm Music Ally, collected over six months. These textual industry data was contrasted and compared with the interview data and related to theoretical discussions regarding communication work and audience engagement.

In this article, I argue that the requirements for producing audience engagement affect communication practices and communication workers, their competences and their responsibilities. The study shows that communication practitioners within the industry express a duty to create audience engagement – they experience an *engagement imperative*. Although the practitioners are highly skilled in digital communication and social media, they often see the development of digital promotional culture as a challenge and express a lack of a deeper understanding of engagement. This study highlights implications for professional roles and identity as well as ethical implications regarding the exploitation of audiences in communication work.
In this article, we contribute with an understanding of how fan communities are co-opted to build value for music brands and used to foster communication in transmedia marketing campaigns. We wanted to examine the incentives for fans to engage with music brands, and their experiences of being part of a platformised fandom and brandom, as extend the existing research on fan hierarchies in digital promotional cultures. When focusing on audiences’ and fans’ social media activities around a brand, important questions of fan motivations, expectations, experiences, morals and power structures are often overlooked.

Drawing on a digital ethnographic study and an interdisciplinary perspective, we investigated the fandom of the Swedish artist Robyn, both online and offline. We followed the Facebook fan community Konichiwa Bitches during two years, participated in concerts and dance parties, interacting with other fans and experiencing the events ourselves. We also did a survey, and conducted 16 interviews with fans and the management of Robyn. We also followed other social media pages and blogs around the artist to gather relevant online media material.

The article contributes to the knowledge of fandom and fan hierarchies, its connection with brandom and the notion of value within fandom in a music brand universe. It adds to the knowledge about the fan perspective and fans’ motivations for taking part and co-creating value in a highly commercialised and strategised music market. The article also discusses how fandom affects the communication strategy and brand work, from an industry perspective, as well as asking questions about the consequences of exploiting fandom as a means of building music brands.
This theoretical chapter raises questions about how authenticity is perceived and how it is manifested in the online environment. It addresses how music artists strategically navigate communicating their brands, while remaining “true” and coming across as authentic. The focus is to problematise and try to map out the heterogeneous and highly commercialised music industry, where the division between artistic and commercial may not be enough to understand authenticity in the contemporary music scene. The chapter also discusses how authenticity is created and whether it is created regarding a music artist brand on social media platforms, and how this is related to strategic communication and branding. Within marketing, authenticity is seen as crucial, as genuineness and “true stories” relevant to the consumers. Although it is not necessarily important that the authenticity is real, only that the consumer perceives them as real. Here is a paradox: can a music brand be authentic and, at the same time, strategically constructed?

This chapter raises questions about how authenticity is perceived, how it is manifested and created, if it is created, in the online environment. There seems to be a difference in how artists and their surrounding management relate to and define authenticity, depending on whether they are more commercial and professionalised or if they are small and independent – although these can also be professionalised. The major actors seem to use authenticity in a more strategic way, as something partially (or even mostly) created. The independent actors – both management and artists – seem rather to emphasise the importance of being real and showing personality, being seen as authentic, and stress the importance and truthfulness of a personal voice and appearance.
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<th>Gap</th>
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<tr>
<td>Emergence in strategic communication. How strategy is carried out</td>
<td>Overall aim: examine in which ways strategic communication practices and strategies are designed and enacted to cater to audience/consumer/ fan engagement</td>
<td>1. How are strategic communication practices enacted and designed to cater for, interplay with, and steer audience and fan engagement within the popular music industry?</td>
<td>Comodifying participation through choreographed engagement – The Taylor Swift case</td>
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<td>How the communication practices interplay with and are adjusted to the requirements to produce engagement, and an engagement imperative</td>
<td>Explore: • emergent strategic communication practices and interactions • fan engagement and co-creation around a music artist • Structures, relationships and negotiations between actors in the ecosystem</td>
<td>2. How do the actors within strategic communication ecosystems, such as communication practitioners, audiences and fans, experience engagement and engagement work around a music artist brand?</td>
<td>Agile, co-creative and data-driven – exploring multifaceted strategic communication work within the Scandinavian music industry The Engagement Imperative: Experiences of Communication Practitioners’ Brand Work in the Music Industry Hang with me – exploring fandom, brandon and the experiences of fans in fan communities The feeling of real. Manifestation and creation of authenticity in online music brand building</td>
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Structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of five chapters followed by a paper section. The first chapter is an introduction (already presented), in which I introduce the research field and the research questions, as well as contextualising the thesis. The introduction is followed by a summary of the appended papers. The second chapter presents an overview of the literature and previous research this thesis engages with. It also presents a theoretical framework for the thesis: the field of strategic communication, its relations with practice theory and the concept of engagement and other related concepts. The third chapter describes the research approach of the thesis, the methods used and reflections on my research process. In the fourth chapter, I summarise the main findings from the five studies, and finally, in the last chapter, I discuss the overall contribution of the thesis to, and provide suggestions for, future research.
Theoretical background and framework

This chapter provides a review of existing research related to the object of study, as well as the theoretical approaches and concepts employed in this thesis. At the centre is the concept and field of strategic communication. It is a still rather new but expanding academic field, albeit building on and bringing together a number of different academic traditions such as organisational communication, public relations, marketing and communication management. Hallahan et al. (2007) argue in their influential text “Defining strategic communication” that the term strategic communication makes sense as a framework and umbrella concept for analysing all sorts of deliberate communication practices by and within organisations in order to promote itself (see also, for example, Frandsen & Johansen, 2015, 2017; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013). Strategic communication has emerged as a more or less unified academic field since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Hallahan et al., 2007), with different research positions, narratives and/or turns: a communicative or linguistic turn (argued by, for example, Taylor & Van Every, 2000); a functionalistic turn (Grunig & Grunig, 2006); a strategic turn (Torp, 2015); a practice turn (cf., Aggerholm & Asmuß, 2016; Heide et al., 2018); a co-creational turn (Botan, 2017; Botan & Soto, 1998); a social reflective turn (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2015); a socio-cultural turn (see, for example, Edwards, 2018) and a critical turn (L’Etang, 2007).

These turns also mirror how organisational communication is researched from a multidisciplinary perspective (Werder et al., 2018), grounded in a number of different academic traditions, for example military theory, mass communication theory, management theory, organisational theory, the humanities (language and rhetoric) and not least public relations. The practice and theory building of public relations grew in an integrated way in the mid-twentieth century, as a way to manage and understand the new relationships between organisations and society (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015). Bernays (1955), among others, offered a top-down or asymmetrical
view of this: to manage public opinion via message spreading to the masses, persuasion and even propaganda. Grunig (1976) proposed an alternative version of public relations, as Bernays’ perspective was seen as resulting in ineffective and unethical practices. Instead, the “two-way symmetrical” approach to public relations, grounded more in dialogue involving communicators and other participants of the communication process, built on mutual understanding not manipulation (Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Grunig, 2006). Nevertheless, Botan and Hazleton (2006) argue that both asymmetrical and symmetrical approaches to public relations are needed, depending on the circumstances, and they are also intertwined in a “mixed-motive game” – the organisation “striving for tactical advantage (an asymmetrical orientation) that does not jeopardize the stability of long-term relationships that both parties can live with, inside a symmetrical worldview” (2006, p. 133).

During the second decade of the twenty-first century, the term strategic communication entered the scene as an alternative to public relations. The term even started to replace it, due to the fact that public relations had been “discredited” and discussed (Zerfass et al., 2018), but also because strategic communication better captures the complexity of contemporary purposeful organisational communication. This is connected to the growing debate about the new role of communication in contemporary organisations as strategic and decisional (as opposed to tactical and supportive). Today, there are different definitions of the term strategic communication. Hallahan et al.’s often used definition of strategic communication is: “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission” (2007, p. 3). As the strategic communication field has been evolving over time, new definitions have been added, honing strategy, action but also social aspects and agency. For example, Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2013, p. 74), added societal aspects in their definition: “the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communication entity to reach its goals”. Zerfass et al. (2018) go so far as to claim that strategic communication encompasses all communication used to engage conversations of strategic significance by an entity – entity in this case including all kinds of organisations: corporations, governments, non-profits, social movements and known individuals in the public sphere. From these definitions, my understanding is that the term strategic communication stands for how entities purposefully use commu-
nication to intentionally present and promote themselves and engage in conversations and negotiations of strategic significance to their goals.

I see strategic communication as an intentional practice, involving different kinds of relating agents (both within organisations and outside). In this chapter, I will explain in more detail how my adherence to a socio-cultural understanding of strategic communication has guided how I approach communication practices, i.e. I am using both a socio-cultural and a practice approach to the concept.

In relation to this umbrella concept of strategic communication, I will present and discuss a number of theoretical inputs that add to the understanding. In the first part of the chapter, the conceptualisations of strategic communication as a practice are reviewed. The first subsection focuses on the framework of practice theory, followed by so-called strategy-as-practice, and the concepts of emergence, agility and liquid modernity. In the second part of the chapter, I introduce strategic communication in relation to stakeholder engagement, followed by discussions on the power dimensions of strategic communication, using the theory of structuration.

**Strategic communication as practice**
The focus and the preferred outcome with strategic communication is to influence levels of knowledge, while changing attitudes and behaviours. But the still dominant understanding of strategic communication as a pre-planned transmission of persuasive messages is contested, according to Gulbrandsen and Just (2016a, 2016b): the reconfiguration of time and space in the digital age, with the open-ended and non-linear character of communication and the possibility of hypertextual and hypermediated meaning formation, break up linear sequence of communication (like action and reaction). This affects the view on strategic communication practices.

Strategic communication practices are found in many occupational areas, including organisational communication, public relations, advertising, marketing, communication management, business management, politics, etc. (Botan, 2018; Hallahan et al., 2007; Holthausen & Zerfass, 2015), which have in common communication that is intentional, carried out with a specific objective and deals with influence and persuasion, in relation to stakeholders. Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015, p. 4, emphasis added) state: “The strategic communication process typically is a communication process that follows from an organisation’s strategic plan and focuses
on the role of communication in enabling the organisation’s strategic goals and objectives.” However, several voices have been raised to break the previously dominant focus on planning in strategic communication, adopting instead a practice approach to strategy.

Gulbrandsen and Just (2016a, 2016b) added perspectives rooted in (post)modernist thinking, understanding strategy as an ongoing “messy” communication process of co-creation involving actors who simultaneously condition and are conditioned by the process. Gulbrandsen and Just (2016a, p. 179) also see strategic communication as a result of “negotiation between the organization, the organization’s concrete situation and its stakeholders”. Relatedly, King (2009, p. 20) elaborates on the process as an “interaction between reader/hearer response, situated context, and discursive patterns”. From these different but related views I understand strategic communication practices as ongoing communication work and processes with an overarching strategic goal and with a focus on interaction with stakeholders.

Communication professionals operate in a complex environment, with constantly changing contexts, relationships, demands and pressures from stakeholders (consumers, audiences, clients and colleagues) (Deuze, 2009, p. 24), which affects the practices. At the same time, there is an increasing complexity and liquefaction of the boundaries between different fields and practices. Professional fields like PR, marketing, branding and social media management are often intertwined due to common grounds, challenges and aims (Hallahan et al., 2007).

Relatedly, there are common expectations on the communication practitioners and their roles and competences (Andersson, 2019, 2020; Falkheimer & Heide, 2018; Steyn, 2009; Zerfass et al., 2014), reflecting the perceived value of their work and the discourses around strategic communication practice. Simonsson and Heide (2021) point to the contradictions and implications of managerial and professional logics in strategic communication, where the main difference is the view of communication. The managerial logic emphasises rationalism and chains of command. A strategy in this view is something an organisation has that is to be controlled and executed by managers. Communication in this view is defragmented to transmission of information in a linear manner (Simonsson & Heide, 2021). The communicative and professional logic perceives communication as sensemaking and social construction, and as something fundamental for the organisation as it is through communication that an entity is produced and
reproduced and meaning is created (Simonsson & Heide, 2021). This is closely related to the constitution of organisations (see CCO, page 9).

Through interaction between actors within an organisation and their stakeholders, value and ultimately strategy are created. Gulbrandsen and Just (2016a) suggest that the focus should be to explore communication strategy as a communicative practice in organisations – as strategising. While strategy is usually seen as something an organization has (like a communication strategy), contemporary strategy researchers argue instead that strategy is something that people do. Johnson et al. (2003), for example, suggest a focus on micro strategy work. They base their thoughts on Weick’s (1989) thoughts on “organizing” – a continuous process for the organisation. This emphasises strategic activities – what members of the organisation do with the strategy or what strategic actions they take.

**Practice theory**

In this thesis I apply a practice-oriented approach, placing emphasis on what people do within their communication work, and on contexts where the communication is carried out. Practice theory is not a unified theory but rather several approaches or social theories that seek to understand social phenomena by analysing the practices that constitute them. These practices – what people do – are shaped by social, cultural and historical contexts, and in turn they shape these contexts.

There are some central terms in practice theory that I will use in this thesis. *Practice* is to be understood as the actions and behaviours that individuals engage in as they go about their daily lives. Practices denote collectively shared and recurring *activities* that actors enact to carry out concrete actions and to make sense of the world (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2019; Shove et al., 2012). Reckwitz (2002) argues that practice theory is a part of cultural theories, distinguishing practice theory from other ways of understanding the social world (in particular, classical sociology and neoclassical economics). In this cultural view, different groups of actors construct specific orders of knowledge or cultures that the members of these groups also draw on to act and to legitimize their actions. Not all types of action are examples of practices. To qualify as a practice, the activity needs to be collectively shared and accepted, i.e. institutionalised as a part of the culture. Reckwitz (2002), Schatzki (2019) and Shove et al. (2012) are leading contemporary practice theorists who explain why practices
encompass both the actual performances of concrete activities carried out by actors and the templates or prescriptions for action, which inform actors’ actual activities but do not determine them. These established practices are relatively stable over time and independent in relation to concrete activities, therefore actors also use them to make sense of the world without acting them out. Hence, practices are both actions and sensemaking frameworks.

In the words of Bourdieu (1984), Habitus is patterns of individuals’ thoughts and behaviours that can be seen as internalised structures that shape perceptions and actions; as “a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). Bourdieu argued that practices are not only individual behaviours but are also shaped by larger social structures and systems of power. Habitus is composed of social and cultural conventions, rules, norms and values, etc. that guide our everyday practice and influence our ways of doing things. These mental structures are representations of the external social structures people interact with on a daily basis. Cultural capital and social capital are also part of practice theory and are directly related to strategy and structure. They are the intangible assets that enable actors to mobilise cultural authority/power as part of strategy, e.g. competencies, education, intellect, style of speech, dress, social networks, etc.

Part of practice theory is also the relation between structures and individual agency, and Bourdieu (1977, 1990) sees society and culture as the result of dynamic interactions between structures and individual agency. In Bourdieu’s view, there are both objective (external) structures and cognitive and motivating (internal) structures (Bourdieu, 1977). The objective structures are products of historical events, but also of active individual agents that take part in the formation and reproduction of their social world. Relatedly, Giddens (1984, p. 17) sees structures as the result of repetitive social practices by agents (individuals or groups) that also draw upon existing structures to perform social actions – interactions – within the social system. I will expand further on how structures and actors’ agency are connected, through Gidden’s structuration theory (see page 60).

First, I will keep untangling issues of strategic communication practices, and how different aspects of practice theory are used within strategic communication, and after that focus on structures.
**Strategy-as-practice**

The strategic framework *strategy-as-practice (SAP)* is based on practice theory and is useful for my discussions on strategy practices. This theory building is a growing perspective within the field of strategic management and strategic communication, part of the “after-modern” phase that emphasises individual, fragmented and pluralistic practices with multiple actors in shared social systems. SAP focuses on everyday practices of organisational individuals and the ways in which they shape organisational outcomes. The strategy as practice perspective perceives strategy as an ongoing accomplishment emerging through strategists’ or other people’s institutionalised practices within an organisation (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Golsorkhi et al., 2015). In the context of strategy research, SAP provides an alternative to the dominant approach to strategy as an overarching plan for the organisation. Strategy as a plan is based on economics and the notion that actors’ activities are a function of rationally fulfilling their common goals and satisfying their needs, in this case by acting in line with a formal strategy. SAP challenges this claim by suggesting that strategy is realised through actors’ shared practices. This implies that strategy is a function of the culture or structures of knowledge that characterise a certain organisation or any other context in which strategy is executed rather than a plan external to, or disconnected from, these practices. However, this does not imply that strategy is devoid of planning.

SAP research has focused on identifying strategy practices, i.e. practices used to accomplish strategy, and many of these, for example meetings, SWOT analysis and workshops (Vaara & Whittington, 2012), is focused on planning and coordinating activities. However, an SAP approach, in line with general practice theory, is open to the notion that the actual activities performed by way of these practices may differ from time to time depending on new data about the environment, such as consumer preferences. As such, the actual accomplished strategic action is emergent yet coordinated by strategic practices (Golsorkhi et al., 2015; Whittington, 2006).

The strategy is thus a socially constructed and enacted phenomenon and a process that emerges through the interactions and practices of organisational actors, which involves ongoing negotiation, interpretation and sensemaking (see, for example, Nicolini, 2012). Jarzabkowski (2005) takes an activity-based view of strategy as practice, focusing on detailed practices and day-to-day activities of organisational life, with a strategic aim
(see also Johnson et al., 2003). Jarzabkowski’s (2005) view is categorised in three ways: rational administrative practices that serve the purpose of organising and coordinating strategy (targets, control systems, indicators, etc.); discursive practices that provide linguistic, cognitive and symbolic resources for interacting about strategy – the everyday language for the strategists; and the so-called “episodic practices”, i.e. the practices that create opportunities and organise the interaction among practitioners in conducting strategy, meetings, workshops, etc. All these types of practices are part of the everyday work of doing strategy.

Practice research remains interested in practices as mediators of the interaction among practitioners (Jarzabkowski, 2005). The SAP perspective is therefore also interested in practitioners. Focus is placed on the actors, their skills and competences, how they act, what they do, with whom, and the social circumstances involved in doing the strategy. As activities are situated – both shape and are shaped by the society within which they occur – actors cannot be considered separately from the context or situation in which they act. To take a practice perspective on strategy is therefore to focus on the social and situated accomplished and strategising actions and interactions of actors. These situated activities can be seen as the common thread holding actors together within an organisation. When analysing strategists as active participants in the creation of situated agency, we can connect to three dimensions of agency: as (less conscious) reproduction of action patterns (related to theories on habitus, Bourdieu, 1977, 1990); as structuration (see Giddens, 1979, 1984; also see section on structuration theory) with projection of goals with the future in focus; and as practical evaluation with real-time judgements in focus. This latter kind of agency is a way for managers and strategists to “bridge the gap between strategic thinking and acting and strategy formulation and implementation in practice” (Jarzabkowski, 2005, p. 32).

The strategy is both formulated in advance and in implementation, when people act. It is both constructed and modified in the process. SAP therefore also highlights the practical-evaluative agency of top managers and their centrality in the complex and competing issues involved in constructing activity. Relatedly, although communication strategy can emerge through interactions among all actors within and around the organisation, there are central agents in strategic communication, such as
communication practitioners and managers – professionals of, and leaders through, communication.

The perspectives of practice theory and SAP are indeed united by their focus on the social practices through which individuals and organisations make sense of their environments and take action. Both perspectives emphasise the importance of understanding how social practices are shaped by broader social, cultural and historical contexts, and how they in turn shape these contexts. Practice theory and SAP also share a concern with the micro-level practices through which individuals and organisations construct meaning and take action.

When studying strategy as practice, focus is on how people talk, act, interact and think about it, as well as the implications of strategising, Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) argue that strategies should be studied on the micro level – studying practices that shape the development and implementation of strategy. Whittington (2006) argues that strategy is not just a rational, analytical process but is rather shaped by a range of social and cultural factors, and should be studied in relation to discourses, narratives, social relations and power relations that shape strategic thinking and action. Vallaster and von Wallpach (2018) argue that the conceptualisation of SAP provides the theoretical basis for identifying the co-creative dynamics of an organisation and its stakeholders and illustrating relationships between micro and macro practices.

While a few strategic communication scholars have explicitly drawn on SAP to study practices of strategic communication (cf., Aggerholm & Asmuß, 2016), it has been more common to recommend it as an approach for understanding strategic communication for organisations operating in a constantly changing environment (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015; Frandsen & Johansen, 2022; Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016b; Nothhaft et al., 2018; Van Ruler, 2019; Volk & Zerfass, 2018), yet not explicitly and systematically draw on or conceptualising strategy as practice within strategic communication. For example, Volk and Zerfass (2018) recommend SAP for studying the alignment of practices and processes of strategic communication, but they do not apply the SAP approach systematically. Hence, the SAP approach remains to be systematically integrated and contextualised within strategic communication management research and applied to empirical research to facilitate agile strategic communication practices – what organisations do to “engage in conversations of strategic significance”
(Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493). This is part of my intention with my thesis. In sum, as the practice perspective emphasises both the processual and the social and cultural dimensions of strategy practices, I see this theory building as fit for this thesis.

**Emergence, agility and liquidity**

As argued above, strategic communication practices are to be understood as social and co-creative practices that are increasingly seen as dynamic, responsive and emergent processes, which are to be reflective and adjusted to input from stakeholders. In their research on strategy as practice, Falkheimer and Heide observe that communication professionals tend to use long-term and overall plans, and, at the same time, they “seem to improvise in order to adapt quickly to a fluid and ever-changing world” (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018, p. 55). Relatedly, Falkheimer and Sandberg (2018) elaborated on a model and concept – strategic improvisation – that relates to communication as a “complex, active and interactive” process defined by “space, time, context, power and the actors involved” that helps in understanding how communication professionals navigate complex, uncertain and fast-paced contexts via flexibility and adaption to situations (2018, p. 254).

The contemporary models of strategic communication focus on two- or multi-way communication and the need to listen to the public and their expectations, needs and concerns. This implicates communication strategies that are emergent, dynamic, fluid and flexible, as suggested by Greenberg and Kates (2014). In their view, organisations need to treat strategic communication as open and collaborative; they should invite and listen to the audience and adjust their strategy accordingly. Communication strategy marketers need to create and curate brand messages and “stir up” (i.e. activate) engagement, and direct conversations via “algorithm curation” (i.e. the use of search data to steer communication), professional curation (adapting content to an audience) and social curation (focused on how audiences connect with each other).

As both part of and in parallel to the practice perspective of strategic communication is the emergent perspective, also seen as a postmodern approach within strategic communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018). The emerging paradigm of the field of strategic communication “promotes a practice-based understanding of strategy and a constitutive understand-
ding of communication”, according to Winkler and Etter (2020). Drawing on the concept of *emergence* (Goldstein, 1999; Mintzberg, 1978), King (2009, p. 20) claims that an emergent strategic communication practice should be understood as a recurrent process and a “communicative construct derived from the interaction between reader/hearer response, situated context, and discursive patterns”. In relation to this, Winkler and Etter (2018) elaborated on Mintzberg’s (1978) distinction between deliberate and emergent strategy, where the former is a linear, rational process and the latter emerges over time as a “result of new opportunities, organizational learning or even accidental actions” (Johnson et al., 2009, p. 17) – an emergent strategy is to be tested in response to changes in the environment (also suggested by Johnson & Scholes, 2008; Van Ruler, 2020), and to be continuously adapted and rebuilt by reflection and learning, as argued above. Acting in a turbulent environment requires adaptive strategies to be able to respond to the reality, Van Ruler states (2021).

Winkler and Etter (2020) claim that an emergent approach to strategic communication perceives strategy processes as responsive and goal-free, and that any consistent pattern of organisational discourse can be interpreted as strategically intended, as well as derived from all employees at all organisational levels. In contrast, despite drawing from the concept of emergence, a SAP approach to strategic communication perceives communication processes as predominantly performed by communication practitioners and managers of various sorts (albeit in a collaborative manner), and that there is a “co-existence of and integration of functional and emergent understandings” (Winkler & Etter, 2020, p. 56), which is also how I use the concept of emergence.

To manage a complex organisational environment, an *agile* approach to strategic communication management has increasingly been recommended by scholars and adopted by organisations (see, for example, Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2021; Van Ruler, 2019, 2020, 2021). An agile approach emphasises adaptivity and responsiveness to external demands, speed, and efficient and effective performances (Sherehiy et al., 2007; Zerfass et al., 2018), involving all employees. Aghina et al. (2018, 2019) see agile organisations as “living organisms” that try to balance stability and dynamism to better adapt to these external demands. Organisational agility can be defined as “the capability to cope with rapid, relentless, and uncertain changes” (Cheng et al., 2020, p. 96) or as “the overall capability of an
organization to respond to and take advantage of the changes initiated by the drivers in the internal and external environments” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 7). Organisations are seen as being benefited by agile work practices, methods and tools (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2016; Roberts & Grover, 2012), as they are (or should be) able to identify relevant changes and to respond proactively. Agile planning processes within organisations are iterative and rely on discovery, choices and adaptation through continuous testing. Agility is described as “letting go” (Dühring & Zerfass, 2021) and represents a change from controlling to enabling (Denning, 2015). Grunig even states that the “[m]ost important is that we abandon the illusion of control” (Grunig, 2009, p. 4).

Organisational agile perspectives invoke new approaches to planning, organising and managing, as well as stakeholder interaction (Zerfass et al., 2018), and involve organisational structures, processes, working tools and technologies. This also means, in many cases, a fundamental shift in corporate culture and mindset (into self-management and empowerment), as well as in employees’ skills and competencies (see, for example, Dühring & Zerfass, 2021). Agility within organisations incorporates a range of (managerial) approaches that also reflect sought-for competences among workers, such as flexibility/adaptivity, speed, a culture of change, innovation, responsiveness, iterative work processes, effective and efficient performance, flattened hierarchies and decision-making structures (Denning, 2015; Holbeche, 2015; Rayner, 2018; Sherehiy et al., 2007; Zerfass et al., 2018).

This is in line with other accelerated demands on the contemporary individual worker to balance the work environment and an expanding range of expected characteristics (Malmelin & Villi, 2017; Sennett, 1998), which also becomes part of the professional identity of the worker (Alvesson et al., 2008; Deuze, 2008). The professional identity forms out of social roles, collectives and relationships (Miscenko & Day, 2016), as desirable feelings, values and behaviours negotiated through a dynamic “internal–external dialectic” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 18) and affected by contextual factors, for example technology. When researching journalists, Deuze (2008) finds that participatory and convergence culture impact both the structure (like standards and set routines, hierarchies, protection by law, ethical guidelines, etc.) and workers’ subjectivity (socio-demographic background, motivation, role models, identity, etc.). These changes also force professionals to develop new skills and competencies (Mykkänen & Vos, 2017),
such as communicational skills, project leading, planning and technological competences. Jeffrey and Brunton (2010) argued that the most important skill of PR professionals is adaptability, indicating flexibility and a willingness to learn, thereby reflecting the agility concept.

Although agility in organisations is not new (cf., Nagel & Dove, 1992; Ragas and Ragas, 2021; Rigby et al., 2016; Sutherland, 2014; Takeuchi & Nonaka, 1986), in the fields of public relations and strategic communication, agility has been relatively absent and only recently highlighted. Van Ruler discussed agile methods for campaign planning (2015) and in 2019, in collaboration with Körver, proposed an agile communication strategy framework. In a special issue of the “International Journal of Strategic Communication” on agility (2021), the editor, Kelly Page Werder, emphasises that the need for organisations to become more agile also profoundly challenges and changes organisations’ strategic communication. It is seen as a paradigm shift from static management structures and practices to more flexible and co-created decision-making models (Ragas & Ragas, 2021). Van Ruler (2015), among others, emphasises that flexibility and agile planning are needed for strategic communication to function, and to see change as a defining part of the communication process.

Communication departments and professionals are increasingly involved in these new forms of demands and prerequisites (for example, digital transformations) and are embracing flexible and agile processes and often developing more agile teams both within the organisation and with agencies/consultancies. In a study carried out by Dühring and Zerfass (2021), chief communication officers and senior communication managers see organisational agility as highly relevant and a core element, despite leading to challenges in implementation (also being something of a buzzword). In sum, agile structures, methods and processes are increasingly adopted in practice, but present challenges in themselves, on both an organisational and a personal level (such as short-term work pressure and constant information flows).

Although strategic communication is frequently conceptualised as dialogic, scholarly focus is often on the architecture of speaking (Macnamara, 2016), omitting the fact that organisational listening is as important for understanding others and what is important to them. Listening is a prerequisite for engagement (Macnamara, 2016), as well as for emergence in strategy. For an organisation, listening today is heavily data-driven
(collecting and analysing large amounts of data from relevant channels). But it is also about listening to relevant stakeholder groups to build and sustain relationships, and to create, customise and personalise relevant experiences and content that can migrate platforms and create more engagement. Large-scale listening also requires resources and systems, as well as tools, technologies and professional skills on an individual level, as well as an organisational mindset such as agility.

From a communication perspective, organisations are perceived as constantly listening and reacting to the environment and therefore constantly learning and changing. In regard to change within an organisation, employees need to understand reasons for change in order to take part and “ownership” in the ideas of change for it to make sense to the organisation (Weick, 1988). In a study by Madsen (2022) on a public sector organisation in a process of change, the employees are described as being engaged in different sensemaking processes or sensemaking enactment, represented by (often overlapping) confusion, uncertainty, frustration, anarchy, coping with the system, acknowledging advantages and/or understanding the process. The employees in the study were frustrated and slightly resistant to change, primarily due to technical and practical issues, although partly shifting towards acceptance over time. For organisations, there can be benefits to interacting with these sensemaking enactments, Madsen (2022) argues – for example, involving and supporting the employees in change processes, being transparent about the reasons for change, and addressing the question of why the employees should be involved, and how to do so.

To understand dynamic and changing contexts in which strategic communication operates, on both a more conceptual and a societal level, I will also use the concept of liquidity as a pendant to agility. The concepts of liquidity and liquid modernity are used by Bauman (2000) to describe the conditions of contemporary capital society where constant social and technological change is liquifying communities, organisations and identities. Giddens (1991), in his theory of late modernity, offers an understanding of liquid modern social life, where spatial and temporal bonds are gradually lost, largely due to digital technologies. Social relationships are lifted out of local contexts and rearticulated across indefinite tracts of time-space (Giddens, 1991, p. 18), and this is sustained by abstract systems (like media exchange, money, technology and professionalised forms of knowledge). Modern social life is also based on individual and institutional reflexivity.
(Giddens, 1991), as the digitally connected world demands that we reflect upon what we are presented with.

With regard to Bauman’s liquid modernity (2000), Schwarz and Aufschnaiter (2022) discuss consumer-brand relationships and culture. In their view consumers embrace liquid relationships – the consumers are hypermobile and hyperconnected as they navigate uncertainty, and organisations and brands cater to consumers by being both nomadic and “liquid motors”, as well as solid and grounding (in terms of history, places, people, etc.). I will use the concept of liquidity as a way of understanding strategic communication and branding as a changing social phenomenon and an evolving practice in relation to a dynamic society.

In sum, I will use the concepts of emergence, agility and liquidity in this thesis to point to central aspects that affect the practices of strategic communication, although it is important to make clear the distinction between SAP and emergent strategy. The former sees strategic communication as micro practices and processes within organisations dependent on stakeholder participation, yet the practices are predominantly conducted by communication practitioners and managers of various sorts. There is also a “co-existence of and integration of functional and emergent understandings” (Winkler & Etter, 2020, p. 56). Winkler and Etter call this an integrative approach to emergence in strategic communication research. In contrast, a more radical transformative approach sees the emergence of strategic communication as adaptive and goal-free, and that any consistent pattern of organisational discourse can be interpreted as strategically intended. The emergent strategy is also used by employees at all levels of organisations. There is a pluralisation of agents. Here, I adopt first and foremost the strategy-as-practice perspective, as I argue that communication strategy is something goal-setting that organisations strive for and do, despite seeing them and treating them as emergent processes.

**Strategic communication as engagement**

To be able to understand strategic communication practices in a socio-cultural way, it is important to discuss the interplay between the organisation and its environment, as well as the people involved in the interplay. More specifically, I place focus on the communication practitioners and the external stakeholders of the organisation and their engagement around the organisation. The terminology regarding organisations’ communication
recipients is rather heterogeneous. The term used is often dependent on the academic and industrial field. In this study, I mostly use the terms stakeholder, audience and fan for what are also referred to as consumer, customer and user. All are ascribed different roles – from being seen as “masses that are manipulated, citizens that are informed, consumers that select, products that are sold, individuals that seek or avoid, networks that form, participants that co-produce, users that interact, groups that meet, and phantom constructs that are imagined” (Steensen et al., 2020, p. 1662). The definition of audience – a public to be reached by messages or cultural artefacts or a target group for communication – is used by the media industry and in audience research. Within strategic communication it is more common to use stakeholder (along with customer or consumer) as a notion for the recipients of communication, i.e. target groups. As the setting of this thesis is the music industry, I also apply the notion of fan – an audience and consumer with a strong emotional connection to the artist or brand. In my articles I use these concepts interchangeably, depending on the research field, journal outlet and context. In this chapter I also use the term engagement as an overall term for audience/consumer/fan activity – for example, to follow, interact with, participate and co-create around – in relation to an organisation, brand or cultural artefact.

The concept of engagement
The concept of engagement is central in my thesis, as it is “inextricably entwined and interdependent” with organisations communicating (Macnamara, 2018, p. 118). As Taylor and Kent (2014) argue, it is key and underlies much of the relational and organisation-public communication research, and it has been seen as a new paradigm for strategic communication (Johnston, 2014), as well as being discussed in, for example, research on journalism (Steensen et al., 2020). Engagement has become something of a “buzzword” regarding stakeholder attention and interaction. Solis (2010) even claims that for organisations it is a matter of “engage or die”.

There are varied understandings and uses of the concept of engagement. How the concept is used in different academic fields differs, as well as how the concept is used in practice. It is often used to express a deeper level of interaction among organisations, individuals, etc. Being engaged is being in a psychological state – as Johnston (2016) defines it: being “fully absorbed, involved, occupied, or engrossed in something”. Nevertheless,
there are many definitions of engagement as a concept and a research field, and several scholars raise concerns about the engagement concept’s lack of a coherent definition (e.g. Evans, 2020; Hill & Steemers, 2017; Steensen et al., 2020).

Steensen et al. (2020) illustrate the complexity of building an engagement theory. Instead, they call for a more explorative approach to bring a social-constructive perspective on engagement (see also Living-stone, 2019). This coincides with Evans’ (2020) argument that the concept of engagement allows researchers to address broader issues and practices around media production and consumption. Evans thereby brings attention to the complexity of engagement in the contemporary media landscape and the need to identify and develop further concepts and terminologies to address engagement in a more nuanced way (see also Hill & Steemers, 2017). This is also in line with, for example, Usher (2014) studying engagement within new journalism, where journalists viewed engagement as only interaction with audiences via social media.

In spite of the centrality of the concept within the communication field, and the fact that the principle of engagement underlies much of the relational and communication research (see, for example, Taylor & Kent, 2014), there has until recently been a lack of conceptualisations even in this field. In their aspiration to define, conceptualise and operationalise engagement, Johnston and Taylor, in their book “The Handbook of Communication Engagement” (2018), highlighted three themes or strands within engagement that have different definitions of what engagement is. The first is a social and relational focus of engagement, which recognises social settings, actors and their relationships. Johnston (2018), for example, defines engagement as “[a] dynamic multidimensional relational concept featuring psychological and behavioural attributes of connection, interaction, participation, and involvement, designed to achieve or elicit at individual, organisation, or social levels” (2018, p. 2). The second is a focus on engagement as interaction and exchange, where engagement is conceptualised as a dynamic process of participation, shared action and experience. Yousuf (2018, p, 261), for example, defines engagement as a “balanced act of purposeful interaction among two or more participants who are willing to exchange resources in return for own benefits”; or, “a two-way, relational, give-and-take between organizations and stakeholders/publics with the intended goal of (a) improving understanding among interactants;
(b) making decisions that benefit all parties involved. The third theme or strand is a dynamic and multidimensional nature of engagement, focusing on the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions (2018), seeing engagement, for example, as a “product of social, interactive sense making processes” (Heide & Simonsson, 2018, p. 210). My understanding of engagement is related to all three of the above strands.

In this thesis, I use the concept of engagement as a central aspect of the processes and practices of strategic communication, relating to all key actors engaging (all stakeholders, including audiences and communication practitioners, as well as the organisations themselves) and the settings the engagement is within. The interaction between the actors – the engagement – is a dynamic and dialogic process where activities, experiences, meanings and discourses are co-created. Applying the network view of engagement is recognising the social structures in relation to the interactions and negotiations among actors, helping to understand more holistically the broader context (macro), communities and organisations (meso) and relational communication (micro level) (as suggested by Doerfel, 2018).

Engagement is also described as having different levels, and as being understood and measured in different ways. In contemporary communication practices, engagement is often seen as activity in social media or on digital platforms that can be measured (for example, likes, comments, followings, streams, etc.), but also as the quality of relationships, levels of trust and satisfaction, as well as impact on a social level. The latter is considered the highest level of engagement (Johnston & Taylor, 2018).

One aspect of engagement that is important to discuss in relation to this is the two sides of engagement: as an individual or collective experience and as an industrial concept. Engagement at an individual level includes individuals’ subjective experiences and emotions. It is cognitive (attention, processing), affective (emotional responses) and behavioural (action, involvement and participation). At a collective level, engagement is seen as a dynamic social process of connection, interaction and involvement among individuals (as collective actions and communities) or between individuals and organisations. Engagement in this context is also associated with people’s interconnections through media. Jenkins (1992, 2006) described a participatory culture where individuals act not only as audiences and consumers, but also contributors to culture and media, framed as relationship building, dialogue, creation and engagement across digital platforms.
Jenkins’ concept of participation is not a theory but has been a central term regarding audience engagement and within the communication field. Overall, the view of, and expectations of, consumers and audiences have changed over the years, from being seen as passive and susceptible to influence to being seen as free and active agents choosing what media to consume and when, making their own meanings from content and creating their own (Jenkins, 1992; Jensen & Rosengren, 1990; Livingstone, 2003).

In parallel with engagement and participation is the metatheory of co-creation that views publics as co-creators of meaning for organisations, brands and themselves. Publics are “partners” in the meaning-making process (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 652), not just means to an end to the organisation. In this rather optimistic view of co-creation, all people, consumers, audiences and fans, are participants and media producers, produsers (Bird, 2011; Bruns, 2013) or prosumers (Toffler, 1980). Shirky (2009) even suggests that old hierarchies are eroded, especially in regard to new media technologies that are increasingly interactive. The other side of the coin is that Internet-enabled engagement and co-creation activities are central to organisations of today in providing resources, such as attention, content and social capital (Taylor, 2018). For music providers, this is done through socialisation and interaction with audiences, customers and fans on digital platforms. Toscher (2021), for example, states that on TikTok, music actors provide music that users can be motivated to integrate in their videos (for gaining in terms of self-presentation, social reward, etc.), which in turn gives value to the music artist and company owning the songs and the TikTok platform (with the owner ByteDance Ltd). This set-up increases the reach and exposure of the music and keeps users interested in staying, following others and creating content on the platform.

In this thesis, I think it is important to discuss the connected and often interchangeably used concepts of engagement, participation and co-creation. I have mostly used the concept of engagement, as it tends to be the concept among those three that resonates best and is most conceptualised within strategic communication. Both participation and co-creation are also ways of engaging with music artist brands. Yet, engagement mirrors the complexity of activity around organisations and their brands, as well as both its normative and more critical aspects.
Engagement, from an industry perspective, reflects what organisations gain when their stakeholders are engaged in, and co-creators of, value. Communication engagement represents both a theoretical concept and a practical framework representing organisational behaviours and communication practices designed to “build stakeholder relationships and respond to the social opinion environment” (Johnston, 2016, p. 272). Previous research on consumer engagement and co-creation has, for example, focused on studying what consumers do for the sake of the brand (see, for example, Obiegbu et al., 2019; Sorensen et al., 2017), and firm-centric processes that do not involve consumers as active participants in the value co-creation process (cf., Ballantyne et al., 2011; Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016). In the context of communication, engagement and co-creation is framed as a means of involving and acting together with both employees and external stakeholders, such as customers and audiences.

The ideal of engagement (Taylor & Kent, 2014) is based on a two-way, authentic, relational dialogue that “enables organizations and stakeholders to interact, fostering understanding, goodwill, and a shared view of reality” (p. 391). Genuine and authentic engagement also requires a commitment to ongoing stakeholder relationships, according to Taylor and Kent. Although communication practitioners are urged to exploit the interactivity of social media for building relationships and two-way communication, Taylor and Kent caution against confusing social media interaction with actual dialogue. Genuine dialogue occurs when spending “time together interacting, understanding the rules of interaction, trusting the other person/people involved in the interaction” (p. 390).

As an industrial concept, engagement is central to how marketers, advertisers and media organisations think about and work with their stakeholders, as well as an indicator of success (again the measurement focus; see, for example, Evans, 2020; Grainge & Johnson, 2015; Napoli, 2011). This positions engagement in an economic context in which stakeholder engagement has the potential to generate market value. Bolin (2012), addressing both economic and cultural implications, argues that the audiences have become an audience-as-commodity and are involved in two production-consumption circuits: “[T]he viewer activities produce social difference (identities and cultural meaning) in a social and cultural economy, which is then made the object of productive consumption as part
of the activities of the media industries, the end product being economic profit” (Bolin, 2012, p. 796). This has resulted in the professionalisation of planning engagement in the cultural industry (Cunningham & Craig, 2019), offering the industry a way to lower the costs of production, marketing and consumer relations and “spread its risky business across a broad spectrum of stakeholders” (Fast et al., 2016, p. 974). Such relations may even manipulate customer behaviour and value co-creation in the producers’ interest (Cova et al., 2011).

It has been strongly suggested that consumers and audiences in their activities are being used as free labour by organisations (Andrejevic, 2004; Bolin, 2012; Fuchs, 2017; Terranova, 2000; van Dijck, 2009;); and are seen as commodities, where brands use the audiences’ creative capital and the data their engagement generates as valuable resources for organisational needs (Arvidsson, 2006; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Smythe, 1981/2006). Consumers and audiences make the content, as unpaid labour (Cova & Dalli, 2009) – also referred to as emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012) or relational labour (Baym, 2018) – and the industry makes the profit (Fast et al., 2016; Jenkins, 2009). It has also been suggested that audiences and consumers are even disempowered in their enthusiasm and will to “work” within the brands as free labour, and thus are being used and even exploited (see, for example, Andrejevic, 2004; Carah & Angus, 2018; van Dijck, 2009; Terranova, 2000). Andrejevic (2014), for example, finds that audiences are frustrated and feel powerless, and at the same time distrustful and resistant, in facing increasingly sophisticated forms of data processes and commercial processes. Although the engagement relies heavily on people wanting to engage, the value also lands back on the brand (or not).

This duality of audiences and consumers – being both passive and active, as well as both engaging for themselves and reacting to input from organisations – is mirrored in a push-and-pull dynamic between them and producers/firms/organisations (Hill, 2016, 2019). On the one hand, audiences are pushed to consume media content (through marketing, distribution and branding). On the other hand, audiences pull different contents by selecting what they want to engage with and giving it meaning, thus embedding it in their everyday lives (Hill, 2019). Participatory cultures have also been discussed (see, for example, Carpentier, 2011) as both power producers and relatively powerless, and the producers as having power over “official” media texts as well as the audience itself (Hills, 2010). From an
industrial perspective, there are preconceptions regarding how audiences should be regarding digital media – active and engaged. Thus, organisations that account for the potential of new media and engage and collaborate with their audiences “have clear advantage in building and upholding long-term relationships” (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015, p. 342) and reach the long-sought-for ideal of so-called “symmetric communication” (Grunig & Gruning, 2006).

However, it might not be so simple, and this may even be a simplistic view. For an organisation to be able to create relationships with their stakeholders, dialogue and relationship-building is central. This organisational engagement orientation has an expected outcome, and in that sense, engagement is operationalised through organisational resources, decision-making and control of parameters. The value of engagement for organisations emerges as an outcome from engaged stakeholder relations, manifested as, for example, sales, customer loyalty, positive reputation, etc. Engagement is seen both as a strategy by organisations and as a legitimising device for engineering public consent. And it is suggested that engagement be reached via choices strategically employed, such as addressing and aligning individual, collective and organisational goals and benefits (Heath, 2018). However, as stakeholders’ expectations about engagement and relations around organisations and brands are shifting in the digital surroundings of today, for organisations seeking relations with stakeholders, generating timely, appropriate but also authentic responses to social expectations continues to be a priority, according to Johnston (2018; see also Taylor & Kent, 2014). So is the question of legitimacy and trust. As power and control underpin all organisational-social relationships, engagement requires clear guidelines to be able to reduce the ambiguities that surround power asymmetric as well as authentic stakeholder engagement (Dawkins, 2014). The same applies to giving up some control in order to achieve stakeholder engagement and mutual benefit for both the organisation and the stakeholder.

Since engagement in the context of modern forms of dialogue is platformised, data-driven and networked, the relationships are indeed increasingly complex. Digital platforms have arisen as new intermediators between industry and audiences, functioning according to different economic and technical logics than traditional mass media. Digital platform use and algorithms help organisations shape their communication practices.
to be uniquely tailored and relevant, thereby making them not that authentic. There is a “fine line between data-driven activities that create a level of intimacy and those that unsettle users”, according to Hearn et al. (2018, p. 519). The platformised engagement is also characterised by owner structures – all engagement on digital and social platforms is there to bring earnings to their owners via selling the engagement as data to other companies.

This combined complicates the dialogue and relationships, and organisations should learn how to navigate these new surroundings. The communication practitioners play a central role in knowing how to manage and control the circulation of content via a range of “networked publics” (boyd, 2008) and interact with the organisation’s stakeholders. They are “brokering relationships” (using Hearn et al.’s (2018) words) with often deeply engaged and affected stakeholders. Studying gamification, for example, Fuchs (2014) argues that there is a risk that elements of deep engagement and digital and social networks give the appearance and experience of genuine engagement, access and transparency, while reinforcing asymmetrical relations between organisations and publics.

When studying engagement in relation to communication practices, I think it is important to problematise and use this opposing view of stakeholder engagement as both deep personal experience and as industrial endeavour – not least when studying the music industry, which relies strongly on engaged audiences and fans. I will therefore in the following section delve further into fans as audiences.

**Fandom and fan engagement**
In order to understand consumers’ and audiences’ engagement in cultural brands – why and in what ways they take part in the brands and the consequences – I will also discuss fandom. Fans are one of the most important stakeholders of music industry strategic communication. There are many definitions of what a fan is and extensive studies on fandom (see, for example, Duffett, 2013; Holt, 2004). Duffett (2013, p. 2) defines a fan as someone that has a “positive, personal, relatively deep emotional connection” with the object of interest. Baym’s (2018) definition of a fan builds on fandom in the music industry, and she characterises fans by the “level of feeling invested in the object of their fandom and the kinds of practices in which they engage” (2018, p. 81). Relatedly, I see a fan as someone engaging actively
with, and relating deeply to, an object of interest. Henry Jenkins, among others, challenged earlier existing stereotypes of fans in his work “Textual Poachers” (1992), which presented fans as thoughtful, productive and creative people, instead of obsessed and “brainless”, which was the earlier view of fans. Jenkins (2006) also claims that at the heart of fandom is the ability to transform personal feelings into social interaction, to come together around their common object of interest, which creates a sense of belonging (Jenkins, 1992) – as fan communities.

Fans are often approached as audiences, it is even hard to make a distinction between the two, according to Duffett (2013). Nevertheless, fans can be seen as “intermediaries between producers and ordinary audiences”, according to Jenkins (2008, p. 73), as fans are more emotionally engaged than the rest of the audience. They build knowledge from a different starting point – they have another way of approaching and experiencing their objects of interest and have the capacity to find, extract and discuss new products. The interest in their object in focus is more of an ongoing ritual. They stay “in frame” after the performance ends (Cavicchi, 1998, p. 92), in contrast to “ordinary” audiences. Jenkins (1992, 2006) sees fans as free agents, transforming commercial culture to suit them. They move across and between texts and create new intertextual connections but are torn between fascination and frustration with the texts that the media industry offers. Fans engage proactively: they rewrite, appropriate, circulate and, when connecting with other fans, they help in spreading the brand.

This is also encouraged by the media industries and brands – the industries need fans as producers and as a marketing device (Artieri, 2012; Carpentier, 2011; Duffett, 2013, pp. 16, 70; Jenkins, 2006). Hills (2010) observes that fans are seen overall as creative but relatively powerless, and the producers as having power over “official” media texts as well as the fans (2010, p. 56). Media producers cannot fully recognise fan activity and creativity, according to Duffett (2013). For the industry, on the one hand, it is a matter of oscillating between collaboration and co-creation with the fans, and trying to steer and sometimes even prohibiting their activities (Hills, 2010, p. 68). Fans, on the other hand, can feel they are being manipulated and exploited by production processes and conventions, serving the desires of media producers (Duffett, 2013, p. 72). What we today call “fandom” consists of a negotiation between the fan as being part of both deeply personal and non-commercial forums, and deeply commodified
practices. The fan as audience is now positioned as a central part of the architecture of “production, distribution, and exhibition of information that circulates throughout new media ecosystems” around a media product or brand (Anderson, 2013, p. 15). Fast (2012), among others, sees the transmedia storytelling around a brand as a site of “pleasure, resistance and exploitation”.

Fandom is deeply intertwined and associated with modern capitalist societies and promotional cultures (Davis, 2013; Duffett, 2013; Hills, 2002; Morris & Powers, 2015). Music, art and film are continuously commodified and fans are increasingly constructed as consumers. According to Duffett (2013), fans resemble ideal brand consumers, and Hills (2002) claims that media industries sees them as loyal consumers that should be courted and cultivated. Fans often embrace consumerism – it facilitates their contact with media products and their objects of interest. This is, as Obiegbu et al. (2019) call it, a heightened expression of loyalty, which covers repeated purchases, positive feelings towards the brand and meaningful engagement with the brand within the fan community. The product or brand of interest benefits from this practice commercially, and the media industry and organisations at large therefore use fandom as a tool. Fan groups and communities also tend to spread the word of the brand, functioning as brand communities that serve both the fans themselves and the brand (see, for example, Cova et al., 2011, 2015; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Sandvoss, 2005; Schau et al., 2009; Sorensen et al., 2017). The brand community plays a dynamic role in the value co-creation process both as providers and beneficiaries (as proposed by Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011; see also Breidbach et al., 2014; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016; Skålén et al., 2015; Sorensen et al., 2017).

Consumer fandom is most often related to media, cultural and sports brands and everyday consumption activities, but also more symbolic and meaning-based aspects of consumption – cultural brands are cultural artefacts and mediated elements of culture (Holt, 2002; Obiegbu, 2018). Obiegbu claims that fandom therefore is a “highly engaged and intense form of consumption, embodying the more social and cultural dimensions of consumer-brand interactions, and the symbolic and meaning-based aspects of consumption” (Obiegbu, 2018, p. 37). Fans participate in the economic process of consumer culture, but fandom can also be seen as a non-monetary environment online. Fans often bypass the economy in loving the
music, sharing and producing content and by organising themselves outside of the commercial.

In sum, in this thesis, engagement around music is seen as both audience and fan practices, experiences and reactions around cultural artefacts and brands, as well as consumer reactions to organisational endeavours. Both these perspectives are important in order to discuss strategic communication and promotional cultures within the music industry. Although there is research on marketing and communication in relation to customer and audience engagement, there is a lack of knowledge about how organisations and their communication practitioners interact with fans and fan engagement, in their communication practice.

As engagement is often instrumentalised within communication practices, voices of caution about this are raised by academic scholars (e.g. Johnston & Taylor, 2018), suggesting that organisations act from their power position, using the engagement just in order to get something out of others and to influence the outcome of engagement. I agree with this position and will therefore also add a critical perspective on strategic communication in relation to engagement, shedding light on the relations and structures of the communication practices of today.

**Strategic communication as hierarchy, power and structure**

There are good reasons to add critical perspectives on external stakeholders’ agency in relation to organisational practices and ask questions about power relations and hierarchies of strategic communication. Critics argue that the power of information in an organisation or in society has never been evenly distributed. As of today, new technology also “primarily allows increased monitoring, new forms of propaganda, and commercial exploitation” (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018, p. 31). Fuchs (2013, p. 39), among others, claims that social media should not be seen as a “realm of user/prosumer participation, but a realm of Internet prosumer commodification and exploitation”. This is in line with a more critical research stance on strategic communication, which moves away from the functional, applied and a strongly organisational focus (see, for example, Werder et al., 2018) that seeks to explain how an organisation can best use communication to reach its goals. Instead, focus is on, for example, the societal impact of strategic communication and promotional practices (see Aronczyk et al., 2017;
Edwards, 2016), to be able to account for the various consensual and non-consensual forms of organised persuasive activities (Bakir et al., 2019).

The word “strategic” is related to making decisions, managing and thinking ahead (see, for example, Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Gruning, 2006), but also to power. Traditionally, public relations and marketing have focused on control and persuasion (besides organisational effectiveness). The view on communication practitioners has also partly been associated with exercising power and manipulating audiences/customers (Hackley, 2007), doing “dirty work” (Ashforth et al., 2017), acting as a “hired gun”, following orders and, therefore, subordinating any ethical judgments of their own (Botan & Trowbridge, 2015). Ihlen and Verhoeven (2015) relate to Smudde and Courtright (2010) in defining power as having three dimensions: hierarchical, rhetorical and social. Hierarchical power is studied within the field regarding, for example, communication practitioners’ position in an organisation. Rhetorical power regards skills that are necessary to be effective with language and symbols, but also the ability to influence the issues and values that are under public debate and the public sphere (see, for example, Bentele & Nothhaft, 2010). Social power connects the two forms of power together: people acting together through communication to produce organisations and to produce societies (Smudde & Courtright, 2010). I see that in discussing strategic communication practices, all of these power dimensions are involved – the communication practitioners are gaining position and legitimacy within organisations, as well as being pushed to gain enforced skills in their line of duty, and at the same time they are “producing” or changing their organisations.

As elaborated upon earlier, new dynamics and relations between organisation and external stakeholder bring new collaborative and potentially power-shifting infrastructures for organisations to navigate. Falkheimer and Heide (2018) state that the practice of strategic communication is a “negotiation between different interests, audiences, and goals” (2018, p. 25). This is partly in line with Deetz (1992), who argues that organisations have both goals and normative ideals of both participation and effectiveness. Building on the arguments of Deetz, Torp (2015) claims that it is important to keep this dual focus on communication. When the real goal of participation is effectiveness instead of participation (which is used as a tactic for reaching effectiveness), participation becomes instrumentalised. When strategic communication is seen and practised as a particip-
atory process that can also emerge from below (being so-called “symmetric” instead of “asymmetric”), individuals have the potential to be central actors in participation with the goals of the community instead of effectiveness. Grunig (2009) believes that the possibilities for symmetrical communication are increasing, that audiences and consumers are increasingly empowered in the relation with organisations/brands (cf., Pires et al., 2006). I believe that it is not that simple, and agree with the need of a contrasting and problematising view.

**Structuration theory**

In order to understand strategic conduct and different actors’ agency within and around organisations, *structuration theory* is useful. This theory was added to practice theories by Giddens (1984, 2003), in relation to issues of societal structures and power. Giddens understands people’s activities as central to social analysis, and frames social structures or systems as being formed over time by and through repetitive human interaction. When we engage in practice, we are at the same time producing and reproducing the structures or institutions we live in. *Structures* are composed of rules and resources and of “the structuring properties allowing the ‘binding’ of time-space in social systems” (Giddens, 1984, p. 17). The agents within the structure are placed in the centre of the theory and are seen as reflexive and capable of reflecting over norms, intentions and actions within a system – they have *agency* to follow one system and refuse another. In Giddens’ view, there is a dialectic of structures and agents in a feedback process without giving primacy to either. There is a “duality of structure” as structure and agency are mutually dependent. Structures are continuing, not fixed, allowing for deliberate change and innovation – they are only reproduced if people continue to draw on them in action.

The focus in structuration theory is the “social practices ordered across space and time” (1984, p. 2). The structural context represents prevailing preconditions, such as resources, norms and facilities, for what actually happens. According to Giddens, the control of resources also enhances agency exercised through following rules, or the rejection thereof. Resources are material or non-material elements available for use by the social actor (Poole & McPhee, 2005) and can be both allocative (command over objects/material) and authoritative (command over people). Strategy in this sense regards both. Rules include legislation, but also routines, norms,
habits, procedures and conventions, that can be learned or be a practical consciousness, a know-how (Giddens, 2003). For Giddens (1984), people have more capacity for agency when they have more structural resources and are able to negotiate more rules. There are three characteristic forms of interaction where agency is performed: through communication, which relates to so-called “signification” or a system’s discursive order (rules governing types of predominant jargon, etc.); the exercise of power, which relates to domination of resources; and sanction, which refers to legitimation of institutional rules and norms.

Figure 2. Structuration theory. Adapted from Giddens (1984) and Barratt-Pugh (2007).

This view is primarily relational instead of hierarchical. Giddens sees power as a characteristic of all social relationships (representing both autonomy and dependence among actors). According to Giddens, it is possible to analyse social situations and systems in which power is more symmetrically distributed, as conscious human agents have the capacity to transcend structures. This can be seen as optimistic, but not naïve – it is an alternative to, for example, systems theory, structuralism and functionalism, which lack theories of the subject and agency (Falkheimer, 2018). Both structures and power are made by humans and may be changed; they are even dynamic. Social structures are both medium and the result of human agency and processes, and therefore open-ended and ever-changing. Different traditions within and around this theory building also press on the fact that structures can go further back, being also preconditions for actions. There
can be hierarchical distribution of opportunities for action – agency is not always easy, and also depends on inheriting power aspects, etc. A change of structures depends on where the agents start in the hierarchy, but also how rigid those are, if individuals are able to be a collective force in change. Giddens also admits the importance of the agent’s skills in being able to act in influential ways within the structure. A middle manager can, for example, play an important role within an organisation if they have the skills and are creative, and therefore have upwards influence.

Giddens’ structuration theory can therefore for example contribute to understanding relations, structures, and practice, such as strategy as practice. For example, activity on middle manager level, like negotiations in the strategy process, in “selling” change and framing rival projects, and how work-life balance is communicated in organisations (see, for example, Fauré & Rouleau, 2011; Kaplan, 2008; Rouleau, 2005). According to Whittington (2010), structuration theory offers an attention to micro-sociological details in organisational contexts, and it is therefore suitable for research on strategy as practice overall, for example how a strategist performs and relates to his/her job of strategising. This makes, for example, the ordinary “guardians” of strategy exert effective control within the organisation, due to the distribution of power. At the same time, sight on structures is not lost – how rules and norms are followed, or how inclusion or exclusion of employees in the strategy process reinforces or not established social and organisational hierarchies. This is especially true today, when strategy work is more dispersed in organisations, due to, for example, more inclusion, less hierarchical structures and to technology, which places emphasis on everybody within the organisation having an influence on strategy as well.

Within communication studies, structuration theory has not been much used yet, but there are examples exploring power and democracy in organisations, communication in groups and identity building in groups (Botan & Hazelton, 2006; Cozier & Witmer, 2007). By using this lens, researchers can add perspectives of, for example, social relations, system-human interactions and ethics, moving away from a more functionalistic view on strategic communication. When the theory of structuration is applied in this area, it is concerned with how individuals, organisations, communication industry structures and the wider society are interlinked and networked, and the power that lies inherent in the relationships between individuals and the social structure (shaped by their communi-
cative activities). In this sense, Giddens tries to bridge macro-analysis to a micro-world of individuals’ everyday lives, and the bridge is practice. The theory of structuration provides a helicopter perspective in contrast to a closer and more grounded approach to the analysis of practice. Individual behaviour and reflexivity are set in dialectic relation to macro-societal changes, Falkheimer argues (2018). This is also in line with the thought of structuration theory’s validity within studies of contemporary organisations, undergoing constant influence and change (Whittington, 2010).

Strategic communication (and more specifically public relations) is interpreted in the structuration view as a social process and may be used as both a reproductive and transforming social instrument. When an organisation is seen as dynamic and transforming, due to communication made by all its members and stakeholders, strategic communication is seen as an ideological communication force that may have many different outcomes (Cozier & Witmer, 2003). As the human individuals of the structures are reflective and active, albeit constrained by social norms and institutions, they can both reproduce and transform systems. Strategic communication can be seen in this view as both a constraining and a contributing practice. For example, communication practitioners follow established routines and practices but at the same time try to change these routines and practices – by trying to expand the domain over which they can exercise control in different ways – in order to increase their own influence. Falkheimer (2018) raises the question of whether the increase in strategic communication in society may be because organisational leaders want to hinder transformation and instead be a reproductive force. Using Giddens’ (1984) perspective of structuration is one way of discussing this question.

Using Giddens’ theories of structuration and late modernity also brings the interpretation of strategic communication as a force in a rapidly changing society. Organisations use strategic communication as a means to handle and manage perceived uncertainty and risk. Giddens’ theories, according to Falkheimer (2018), are relevant for more holistic analysis of strategic communication as a “reflexive and social expert system, in a dialectic relationship to societies norms and values” (2009, p. 89), but also for gaining a societal understanding of the communication practice and its consequences for, for example, social contexts, social responsibility and ethics (2018, p. 187). Although lacking in empirical grounding, using structuration theory can be fruitful as it can bridge the dichotomy between
more instrumental strategic communication theories neglecting power structures and critical theories that focus on public relations as hidden strategic actions used to dominate the public, according to Falkheimer (2007).

I agree with this view and will relate to structuration theory to explore the dialectics and relationships of strategic communication practices and their surroundings. There are critics against the theory as it can be seen as too abstract. Giddens was more concerned with abstract characteristics of social relations and practices, to study them as structures from afar. But can practices be understood from a distance? As I see it structuration theory is suitable for integrating the macro and the micro level of strategic communication, and for understanding strategy in practice as part of communication systems, with a focus on everyday practice as situational, spatial and temporal. This is also in line with the socio-cultural turn of strategic communication that demands an examination of the social and cultural context in which action takes place (Edwards & Hodges, 2011), and the social consequences that communicative endeavours have (Edwards, 2018), which is also one of the main goals of this thesis.

**Summarising the theoretical framing and positioning**

The overall aim of this thesis is to qualitatively and critically examine strategic communication practices in relation to organisational stakeholders’ (audiences and fans) engagement within the music industry. To fulfil this aim, I have presented in this chapter some relevant theoretical points of departure. I use the theoretical lens of practice theory and related strategy-of-practice to discuss actions and agency of strategic communication. Focus is therefore also placed on communication practitioners, as well as music audiences and fans and their engagement around music artists. Engagement is here seen as both audience and fan practices, experiences and reactions, as well as reactions to organisational endeavours. Both these perspectives are important in order to discuss promotional cultures within the music industry, as previously argued. Finally, I also discuss structures and power aspects of strategic communication and strategic agency, elaborating on the theory of structuration. The ambition is to extend previous research on strategic communication in relation to stakeholder engagement, by exploring practices from a socio-cultural perspective.
Methodology and empirical material

In this chapter, I will initially lead a reflexive philosophical discussion and explain my position. This is then followed by a methodology section in which I explain how I have collected and analysed my empirical material. After this, I also reflect on matters of quality, trustworthiness and ethics, as these aspects are vital for assessing the knowledge produced. Researching communication strategy practices calls for qualitative modes of exploring, and gaining a deep understanding of the phenomenon, as well as grasping actors’ activities, understandings and relationships involved in communication practices. In other words, studying practices requires looking at and understanding what is happening. Whittington (2010, p. 148), elaborating on Giddens’ structuration theory in relation to strategy-as-practice, promotes a qualitative ethnographical approach to make it possible to do a “full-spectrum research” – a “wide-angled analysis of institutions, as well as the microscopic study of praxis”. Accordingly, to understand practices it is important to also come close to such practices and not only let interviewees talk about them. However, as my thesis was partly done during the pandemic, it made it impossible to conduct a close study of a music company, which forced me to partly change my initial methodological plans. My study is therefore qualitative and I apply an ethnographic approach in some of the studies (partly with help from colleagues), alongside interviews and content analysis.

Epistemological and ontological considerations
How can we understand and learn things about a complex phenomenon? As Järvinen and Mik-Meyer (2020) propose, there are different approaches within different analytical traditions. There is a dividing line between epistemological stances related to realism and positivism and those related to constructivism – the first seeing data as representing facts of the world and the researcher as neutral, and the second seeing analysis and knowledge
as something that is understood and constructed by the researcher. Within a constructivist stance, researchers focus on “the processual, complex and ambiguous nature of the phenomena they study” (2020, p. 9). The data are displays of perspectives, representing individual experiences as well as social and cultural conventions (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2020; Silverman, 2015) and constructions. This latter perspective, where I understand research as something interpreted, contextualised and constructed, is the one I am adhering to.

Understanding also presupposes our beliefs and experiences of the world. The story of me as a researcher started with my work in the advertising industry as a communicator, designer and brand strategist for a number of years, before partly going to academia. Having a first-hand understanding of a line of work I am studying could of course “colour” my analysis, but also enrich the understanding of the field and context I am studying. At the same time, it can also bring legitimisation in relation to the interviewees and easier access to both organisations and phenomena. I understand that my study object is a complex setting, with many ways of functioning, experiencing and understanding.

My thesis is a qualitative study. Qualitative research analyse meanings and interpretations from the perspective of those involved. Focus is on processes and actions as much as content, and also on the context of the phenomena studied. My aim is to understand in depth a social phenomenon, instead of explaining the study object. Understanding means coming close to and interacting with it (Aspers, 2007). To conduct the investigations related to my research questions, this study applies an approach that is qualitative, as well as reflexive and abductive. The study is reflexive, involving a sceptical orientation toward what appears at first glance – involving reflection on interpretations and knowledge production as well as problematisation and systematic questioning of underlying assumptions. The abductive approach this thesis takes let me develop an understanding and theoretical constructs based on the empirical data, and go back and forth between different theoretical and empirical inputs making inferences and comparisons to inform both theory and practice (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Van Maanen et al., 2007).
Qualitatively studying strategic communication practices in relation to engagement

The purpose of this section is to explain how I have planned, designed and conducted my thesis project to fulfil the project’s overarching aim to contribute knowledge about strategic communication practices within the music industry, in relation to stakeholder engagement. Here, I will explain my overarching research design for the project as a whole. I will also explain and discuss my collection and analysis of the empirical material. Finally, I will also reflect on aspects of quality and ethics in relation to my studies.

Given my aim, I identified a need to approach the phenomenon broadly and investigate the practices, the actors involved and the relations between them. To concretise the overall aim of the thesis project, and in line with the conventional view on research strategy (Bryman, 2007), I formulated initial research questions to guide the following research process. During my thesis project, my research questions have evolved and changed, which is in line with the abductive and ethnographical approach.

Another factor influencing the research design is that my research has been done partly within the research project MECO – Music Ecosystems Inner Scandinavia. This was a three-year project (2018–2021) aimed at mapping, strengthening and innovating the music service ecosystems in Scandinavia, with user experience in focus. I chose to focus on strategic communication in relation to audience engagement.

The initial stages of a research process are described by Tracy (2020) as a “dance” between one’s research questions and one’s access to empirical material and settings, which the MECO project could partly facilitate by providing access to the music industry and different actors within it. I identified early on the need to explore in depth the phenomenon of strategic communication practices in a digitalised contemporary setting. To attain a wider understanding of strategic communication within networked participatory cultures, and more specifically the music industry, I chose a mainly qualitative focus. Qualitative methods are usually considered suitable when the purpose is to explore a social setting and provide a detailed understanding of a social phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hine, 2015). This kind of methodology helps in developing a deep and holistic understanding of complex and multifaceted contexts (Hine, 2015), observing and following practices, and flows of conversations and content (Marcus, 1995). In my thesis, I have also explored
and asked critical questions about the relations between communication practitioners and audiences, work practices and structures and the people within them.

In researching contemporary promotional transmedia communication campaigns and their data traces, digital methods are close at hand, as they provide clear methodological guidance and tools for data collection and analysis (see, for example, Carah & Angus, 2018; Kjus, 2016). Often these kinds of studies need to be complemented by digital quantitative studies by using qualitative data collection and analysis, highlighting, for example, interconnections, cultural consumption, promotion practices and experiences. For example, Nieborg et al. (2020) argue for mixed-method approaches, with both quantitative and qualitative methods such as interviews and observations to be able to come close to, for example, online communities when studying platformic cultural production.

I have partly chosen an ethnographic approach, with participatory observations and interviews. Ethnography is a qualitative methodology that focuses on trying to understand social lives as they unfolds – how people act, how they feel in the actual context (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 1). It is a method that puts the researcher partly in the centre and requires her to get close to the study object. The researcher should “immerse herself in the setting, and (...) try to see life from the point of view of those who habitually populate that setting” (Hine, 2015, p. 19). Within traditional ethnography and anthropology, participatory observations of contexts and places are key. A number of different qualitative methods can also be used in relation to observations to collect and analyse the data, such as “go-alongs”, interviews, content analysis, etc. I chose to start with interviews to come closer to an understanding of the context and experiences within it, and continued with observations and content analysis, and further interviews. During the period of this thesis, I worked both alone and together with other researchers, doing studies and case studies, with methods chosen to match the research questions and for the different articles of this thesis.

Investigating a partly digital, networked object of study should focus on mobility in relation to what is happening across platforms during the study period, which can result in multi-sited digital ethnography (Hine, 2015; Marcus, 1995; Pink, 2016). This method makes it possible to focus on the social spaces that emerge through the use of the Internet and also on those existing beyond it (Hine, 2015). Traditionally, ethnography has focused on
a geographic place or space, but with a digital, networked study object; the attention is on mobility in relation to what is occurring during the study and across platforms. In contemporary social life, people combine online and offline experiences seamlessly, as the Internet is so built into our lives that we hardly recognise it. The Internet is an embedded, embodied and everyday phenomenon (Hine, 2015), and challenging to research as it is complex, moving and ever changing. Postill and Pink (2012) claim that an ethnographic approach is fruitful when studying connections between online and locality-based realities, to follow “(dis)continuities between the experienced realities of face-to-face and social media movement and socialities” (2012, p. 124). It is important here to use mobile methods, to follow the people and group in this case, across platforms and between online and offline, to be able to understand the movement of the people and their ideas that travel virtually across networks and via mediated communications (Büsher & Urry, 2009).

Ethnography as a method and process is explorative and adaptive, and the researcher should be open regarding both the research strategy and the process and have a reflexive approach throughout the process. Researchers should expect multiplicity, fluidity and uncertainty, as Hine suggests (2015). Pink, (2016, p. 8) claims that there are five key principles for doing digital ethnography, i.e. “multiplicity, non-digital-centric-ness, openness, reflexivity and unorthodox”, pressing on the need to be flexible. Iteration between theory, data collection and analysis should characterise the research process (Becker at al., 2012). The research design and the methods should evolve, if necessary, as the study progresses (Hine, 2015; O’Reilly, 2012).

During my thesis work, both my research questions and how to operationalise them have changed. As I decided to do a compilation thesis, the initial idea of which articles to write also evolved over time, although the main idea and overall focus remained the same. I have therefore undertaken several partial studies focusing on different aspects of the matter. The qualitative method repertoire consists in activities, such as observations, taking part in and recording activities, interviewing informants, doing questionnaires, gathering data and artefacts, mapping and visualizing the data and interpreting results. I have done observations both on site (offline) and online, gathered relevant online media material, and followed and participated in different activities and places, such as workplaces, meetings, concerts and social media group discussions and activities. It is a matter of
engaging with the field, watching what happens and listening to what is said (Hine, 2015; O'Reilly, 2012).

**Participant observations and digital ethnography**

As recommended by Hine (2015, p. 165), the aim with my study is to observe and follow the flow of practices and conversations within my field of research: music industry strategic communication. It is recommended for a qualitative approach to undertake a purposive sampling strategy to enable the identification of information-rich or -intensive cases (Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2020). For the observation studies of this thesis, me and colleagues searched for cases both by monitoring the music industry and via contacts from within the MECO research project. We chose two main cases, using a single-case approach (Yin, 2009), to be able to study strategic communication around music artists and engagement as both an outcome of strategic communication around an artist and as fan activities and fan communication around a music artist.

The first case that we followed represented a global communication and marketing campaign to make it possible to study large data flows of audience and fan engagement in relation to a campaign around a music artist brand. The second represented a Scandinavian artist (as the project was Scandinavian) with a deeply invested fan community, with the aim of closely following fan activities and experiences. We chose not to anonymise the two artists followed, as they were very specific and it would be easy to detect the real cases without changing a lot of the context. We also actively chose two female artists with deeply engaged fans, as we wanted to contribute with more gender balance within music industry research. There are many examples of studies of musicians and bands, especially with a rock and a k-pop focus. That said, the two artists are also pop music artists. Choosing, for example, a male rock band might have produced different results in terms of fan engagement. Yet, the ambition is to present results representative for fandom overall.

Three different cycles of participant observations were decided upon and executed within this project. First, we followed a global promotional transmedia campaign and its flows of audience and fan engagement. We followed the American music artist Taylor Swift’s upcoming album *Reputation* and the marketing campaign for it during autumn 2017 (resulting in Article 1). Swift was already a global mega artist (signed to one
of the major music companies), and her management and record company strategically used streaming services (e.g. Spotify, Deezer and Apple Music) and a range of social media platforms (e.g. YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr and TikTok) to distribute her music, engage and build relations with their fans and strengthen the artist’s brand. Researching such a setting comes with challenges, as a campaign of this multitude is hard to grasp. In these kinds of campaigns there are many layers – including traditional media outlets like PR, advertising and artist performances on TV. There is also a lot of brand communication on the artists’ social media channels, as well as all the fan activity was started and propelled by the campaign and by the fans themselves. A lot of things happened at the same time both with and without strategic thought behind them. The launch of the record was discussed heavily before the release in both the industry and among fans, and we thought that this would be a perfect case to follow in real time, as it represented a large and complex networked transmedia campaign, with representation both online and offline, as well as both traditional and digital communication. After the campaign, it was also talked about as the music marketing campaign of the year across the world (Music Business Worldwide, 2017), which proves that it was indeed a campaign of global interest. During this campaign we used an explorative data collection method called “live capturing”, which combines digital data collection tools (such as the digital scraping tool Mecodify; Al-Saqaf, 2006) with manual capturing to collect qualitative data in real time (further developed in Ryan Bengtsson & Edlom, 2021). We followed and gathered data from all the artist’s social media channels (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter), collected data both in millions of data points of certain artist and campaign hashtags, as well as following the campaign manually, collecting screenshots and material over a period of six months in 2017.

Second, we followed the Swedish music artist Robyn and her brand and fan universe, with a special focus on the Facebook group Konichiwa Bitches (KB) connected to Robyn and her management. This case was chosen as we wanted to follow an established Swedish artist with a large fan base but with a more independent approach (having her own record company). This case also provides a rich empirical context because the artist uses social media extensively (mostly Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube), as well as a Facebook group to actively communicate with her fans (a community that quickly grew to include fans from all over the world and is now partly fan
administered). We followed this group in a digital ethnography study over a period of two years (2018–2020), both online and offline, to understand fandom around an artist, both from a fan and an industry perspective, as well as how the communication practitioners related to the Robyn ecosystem used the group for communication purposes. The collected material consisted of a vast amount of data, such as texts, images, screenshots from social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube), interviews and observation notes, which were qualitatively analysed over time.

Third, participant observations within a global record company were carried out by one of my colleagues within the MECO research project between March and November 2019, at a regional record branch office. Three full weeks were spent at the site. The studied record company employed about 40 people at the time of the study, of which a little less than half worked in the communication/marketing department; however, almost all the employees were involved in communication and marketing on a day-to-day basis. The data were primarily collected through participant observations of the communication and marketing practices (marketing team practices and dispersed practices within the company, such as meetings and everyday interactions), as well as interviews with some of the employees. Field notes were taken during or directly after participant observation. Initially I had planned to do another round of observations in 2020, but this was first postponed and then cancelled due to the pandemic, and I had to make do with the gathered material from my colleagues observations, also focusing on strategy practices.

The question of getting access is key here. To get access to a group or a setting can be hard. I wanted to be able to do my own second round of observations, but was denied access due to the pandemic, as stated above. In the fourth study of the thesis, regarding fan practices, we negotiated access to key gatekeepers in the Facebook group Konichiwa Bitches – a fan community – and tried to make ourselves socially acceptable, as Hine expresses it (2015, p. 71). Once accepted, we started to take part in the group activities and discussions. Our aim was to be active in listening, watching, discussing and sharing information in forums, which is recommended in digital ethnography (Hine, 2015; Pink, 2016). We also regularly scanned through the sites of interest and studied posts (pictures, texts and conversations) and took screenshots to be able to conduct a qualitative content analysis, to interpret and describe relevant topics and themes. We
took part in online and offline activities, like concerts and meet-ups, and planned a trip to a fan-organised dance party with help from the fan community. In sum, getting access to, and knowing where to find, information and possessing the related knowledge of how to understand it contributed to my selection of data appropriate to the study, and to my gaining access to the right data.

**Interviews**

To be able to get closer to both strategic communication practices and actors’ experiences of those within the music industry, I also undertook interviews with music company representatives both connected and not connected to the cases presented above, such as communication practitioners, management and strategists on different levels in Scandinavia, Great Britain and the US, as well as fans of two artists. I have conducted 35 interviews in total, see Appendix for overview (observe that the interviews conducted by a colleague during the participatory observations at the record company in article 2 are not listed here).

The interviewees in my studies were chosen from a combination of variation selection (they represent the width of the phenomenon) and type selection (they represent the typical with the specific phenomenon), to be able to find patterns in the phenomenon. This selection is partly made through convenience sampling and snowball sampling: first, the music industry people and fans most readily available, and contacts generating further contacts. This has, in a way, been important, since it is not always easy to get in contact with people in the industry who are willing to be transparent. The interviews in this study were conducted between 2016 and 2022, either in person or over Skype, Zoom or the telephone, and they lasted between 20 and 65 minutes and were transcribed.

The Interviews were semi-structured, in-depth interviews in order to get access to the interviewees’ perceptions and experiences of a phenomenon (Ekström & Larsson, 2010. The advantages of interviews include obtaining information about aspects that are hard to reach otherwise: understanding processes, social relations, deeper meaning and interpretations. When conducting the semi-structured interviews, I followed an interview guide with questions built on themes. The questions were relatively open and it was possible to ask follow-up questions. Questions also changed over time and between the different studies within this thesis.
According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), there is a risk in a qualitative respondent interview that there is a thin line between the desire to obtain knowledge and maintaining an ethical approach towards the respondent. The person interviewing should be as thorough and profound as possible, without violating the respondent. This requires respectfulness without missing out on important information and “scraping on the surface”. When interviewing, it is also important to realise that the interviewee digresses at times and they might not always say what they think or mean what they say. Statements from interviews are not true or false representations, they are actions arising from an interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, that become sources of information only through analysis and consciousness. Although one might question whether interviews within a study can provide the truth – i.e. whether interviewees always give honest answers – I think that all the interviews of this thesis combined provide an under-standing of the processes and experiences, and enable a close understanding of the study objects.

Qualitative content analysis
During my thesis work I have also gathered a lot of digital data, both from social media and from other web platforms, as well as content produced by music communication companies. In the Robyn case, we gathered material from Robyn’s own digital and social media channels like her web page, Instagram and Facebook, as well as from the Facebook group Konichiwa Bitches. We took screenshots over several months, both around specific activities and following the daily-life practice within the group. In the Taylor Swift case, we collected media from her official social media platforms, including her Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube accounts, her official website, and music distribution accounts on iTunes and Spotify. We also gathered quantitative data following specific hashtags on Twitter and Facebook for six months.

For the article about the engagement imperative, I also gathered industry texts for analysis to understand the discourse around the practices from another source other than interviews. One important source was the music marketing firm Music Ally, a PR firm that has specialised in building communication to music audiences and has become influential in the global music industry by distributing industry insights into markets, trends, technology and viewpoints. This material was collected between November
1, 2018 and June 1, 2019 and consisted of a daily digital newsletter (*The Music Ally Bulletin*) and a monthly report (*Sandbox* – the digital music marketing magazine) that is sent to subscribers worldwide, along with web and social media content.

Using a qualitative content analysis approach, I have tried to interpret and describe relevant topics and themes within the material, both in relation to the specific research questions and articles, and as a whole. Content analysis is not a single method but three different approaches, i.e. conventional, directed and summative (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), with specific analytic procedures. In this case, I follow the conventional approach, where coding categories are derived directly from the text data. I will expand on data analysis in the next section.

**Overview of gathered material and used method**

In sum, I used an ethnographic approach and different data collecting methods connected to different parts and studies of the thesis.

**Table 2. Overview of research data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empirical data</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study/case</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Taylor Swift case</strong></td>
<td>Mixed methods: Digital ethnography, Quantitative digital data: 110 Twitter posts, 23 Facebook posts and 232 948 comments, Manual data gathering: screenshots on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Musical.ly/TikTok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Robyn case</strong></td>
<td>Digital ethnography: participatory observation in Facebook fan community, online and offline. Collecting content and taking screenshots, Interviews with fans and management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Record company study</strong></td>
<td>Participatory observations, 20 interviews with personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practitioner perspective</strong></td>
<td>31 semi-structured interviews with representatives from record companies, management, PR and marketing firm and music artists, Content analysis of Music Ally daily digital newsletter and music industry monthly report sent to subscribers worldwide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
My methodological endeavours led to material that was used in different ways in five articles (see overview on page 32), in relation to the research questions.

**Table 3. Overview of Used Methodology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Article 1</td>
<td>RQ 1</td>
<td>Digital ethnography, mixed method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 2</td>
<td>RQ 1</td>
<td>Ethnography, interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 3</td>
<td>RQ 1, RQ 2</td>
<td>Interviews, qualitative text analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 4</td>
<td>RQ 1, RQ 2</td>
<td>Digital ethnography, interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>RQ 1</td>
<td>Literature review, interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kappa</td>
<td>RQ 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data analysis**
The analysis of my data was undertaken both during the data collection, in relation to the different articles within the thesis, and also during the later stages of my work, with this kappa. Hine (2015) claims that ethnographic research done in and through mediated communication is always in some ways “insider research”, using the means of communication that is also the object of the study (2015, p. 85). It is hard to question the taken for granted as being on the inside. It is important to remain reflexive and have a critical orientation, but at the same time stay an insider in the data collection process, according to Hine (2015). Postill and Pink (2012), though, suggest that ethnographic researchers follow routines of catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting and archiving to maintain a consistent research road. When studying digital surroundings such as social media, for example, Postill and Pink stress the need to participate and collaborate in social media discussions. Adding value like this to the site of study as a researcher enhances the researcher’s “name and fame” and the chances of having more interaction with the participants, according to Postill and Pink (2012, p. 128). This was also the focus during our Robyn study, to participate and gain more interactions.

The data analysis was performed using an abductive approach. Hine claims that “[a]n ethnographic study cannot be fully designed in advance, for the methods of inquiry that an ethnographer develops are uniquely
suited to the specific situation being studied” (Hine, 2015, p. 5). In line with that, the research process was characterised by an iteration between theoretical inputs, data collection and analysis. This methodology also gave the respondents a strong voice in guiding the data analysis. Respondents were able to explain their thoughts, intentions and actions. Inspired by the grounded constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the approach provides a way to identify rich theoretical descriptions of the context within which the phenomena occur, guided by respondents. For example, interviews could lead me in new directions or to new theoretical thoughts, new data sources or persons to interview.

All data were examined using a qualitative content analysis that identified similarities and differences among relevant topics and categories, which were then described and interpreted. Qualitative analysis is usually adopted when finding categories of data. In all the different parts of my thesis work, in relation to the different studies, I have categorised and coded data into smaller units, names, labels or themes, based on my knowledge, presuppositions, interpretations and the theoretical concepts chosen. This categorisation is also connected to the narratives of the study phenomenon, in this case organisations and more specifically music industry organisations. As recommended by Gioia et al. (2013), we started each data analysis phase by coding the data set, identifying empirical codes and constructing empirical phrases closely related to the respondents’ descriptions. We then constructed second-order themes by combining empirical explorations with theoretical reflections, followed by aggregate dimensions and key themes. Qualitative analysis also involves narrowing down empirical material, as a qualitative study often generates far more data than it is possible to publish. It is a matter of zooming in, choosing, then moving from initial codes to focused codes – to identify and develop analytical categories that can help analysis, conceptualisation and theory building.

In some of the studies of this thesis both the data collection and analysis were complex, as they included vast amounts of data points of various kinds. Stieglitz et al. (2018) point out that visualisation of data should be integrated into the research process, not only used as a way to communicate results. To analyse the data in the Taylor Swift case, we used time-based data layering to organise our scraped quantitative data and manually collected qualitative data. For example, we layered data from Facebook and Twitter on top of each other visually to help in understanding how social
media activities from the campaign on those platforms were connected. Each campaign activity was mapped out in relation to each other, modelling a visual map of the whole campaign. The descriptions of each activity found within the campaign, combined with screenshots, facilitated an understanding of the campaign, how the activities were constructed and combined in time and space, audience responses to the activities and movement across platforms. This helped us to oscillate our analysis between campaign activities and levels of audience engagement to understand their connections. In this way, we identified events that required further investigation, with exceptionally high engagement, of cross-platform activities and events interconnecting the online and the offline. Layering data also provided guidance in identifying empirical codes and then constructing empirical phrases, by combining empirical explorations with theoretical reflections about engagement (more on these processes in Ryan Bengtsson and Edlom, 2021).

In sum, my research process has been explorative and adaptive, in accordance with an ethnographic approach. Hine (2015) suggests that a researcher should be open and agile in both the research strategy and the process and adopt a reflexive approach throughout the process (Hine, 2015), which I have been and done. My analysis has been ongoing throughout the last of my articles of this thesis, as well as within this kappa.

Methodological considerations
In this section, I discuss challenges and considerations of my research, such as trustworthiness and ethical challenges.

Trustworthiness of the research
The trustworthiness of a study is, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the most important criterion for assessing the quality of qualitative research. As recommended by Wallendorf and Belk (1989), the findings of my different articles of this thesis have been validated by triangulation across the methods, researchers, reviewers, respondents and sources. In some of the studies, I collaborated with other researchers. In these cases, data were analysed and categorised independently by the researchers involved and then compared and cross-checked to make sure that the findings represented the various types of respondents.
In my studies there are as earlier mentioned rather large sets of data – notes from observations, interviews, text material and screenshots, images and digital data collected from two different cases. These cases, where I have followed a marketing campaign and a fan community, are in themselves rich and vibrant and provide fruitful insights into the understandings of fans and their experiences of the fandom around a music artist. Nevertheless, collecting and studying large amounts of online data implies some challenges: it could affect the choice of the right data and ways of gathering and storing them (boyd, 2015). Stieglitz et al. (2018) address these challenges and propose solutions. They suggest that social media analytics processes involve four distinct steps: data discovery, collection, preparation and analysis. Based on their review, there are plenty of challenges referring to each of those steps, but it also suggested possible solutions: as there is often a data-centric view on social media data collection (using different kinds of digital methods for gathering and analysing), there is a need to bridge social and computational sciences and treat social media analytics as an interdisciplinary field. Tinati et al. (2014) argue that techniques from computer science and theories from social sciences should be combined to solve challenges in social media analytics. A critical approach should be used – asking critical questions throughout the process, even before data are collected to help decide which data to collect. There can also be a challenge in setting the right frames of what to study, but also discovering relevant topics and events in the data, as well as gathering and organising them, due to the volume of data and the dynamic social media communications (Hurwitz et al., 2018; Stieglitz et al., 2018). Solutions to this may include developing topic modelling algorithms, using, for example, tags.

Obtaining and understanding high-quality data is also challenging, according to Stieglitz et al. (2018). The obtained social media data are often incomplete, noisy or even unreliable. Within my studies we have tried to work systematically in collecting data, but we also remain open to what emerged. For example, when following the Taylor Swift case, we decided to follow campaign hashtags that arose within the campaign during its first days (generated by both the campaign and by fans) on all social platforms used by the campaign. Capturing a campaign with an extensive use of social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc.) demands a variety of approaches to collecting data as access and policies for data collection on the platforms shift over time. During the Taylor Swift
campaign study, Instagram shut down their Application Programming Interface (API), prohibiting us from retrieving data from the platform. Such uncertainty of data access suggests the need for a multi-approach to ensure rigid data collection, relying on available methods of collection. We therefore ended up using the Twitter data collection tool Mecodify (Al-Saqaf, 2016) for capturing Twitter data from the campaign activities and engagement (using hashtags). We also used downloaded data from Swift’s Facebook account using Netvizz (Rieder, 2013). Netvizz captures posts as well as likes, shares and comments associated with the post and with the specific users. We also collected data from Taylor Swift’s YouTube account through a transcript scraper, collecting video posts, comments, likes and shares associated with a specific account. From Instagram we collected screenshots. All in all, we ended up with a massive amount of data – but only in this case – that needed to be analysed and stored. Nevertheless, our mixed method shows the level of openness and innovation mood that is needed in these kinds of research projects.

The fact that I am familiar with social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) on a professional level from previous work, and have the technical skills required to be effectively present in the setting (Hine, 2015) has also been helpful in facilitating getting into such a complex process and understand the context. Knowing where to find information and how to understand it has helped in gaining access to the right data and to selecting relevant data.

All in all, this thesis is based on large sets of data from two single-case studies, two participatory observation rounds, and a number of interviews, in order to try to represent music industry communication practices from different angles. Despite delving deeply into a complex arena such as music industry communication and engagement, I believe that the results of my different studies may be applicable and transferable to other contexts with a focal actor and fans. The music industry might represent any organisation or industry, either large or small, in its endeavours to tackle a digital environment, and connected external stakeholders.

**Ethical challenges and considerations**

Ethical considerations are always central when conducting research. However, within online research, there are certain additional ethical aspects that need to be taken into account. With regard to ethics, my main concerns
are related to digital ethnography and gathering data online: the need to be open with my intentions and ask permission to join fan groups and their discussions as a researcher, which I have openly done. The need to ensure the privacy of the fans of the groups and the people being interviewed, keeping them anonymous, is another ethical matter. It would really be useful to show pictures (screenshots) of the conversations and posts from social media when presenting results. But in terms of the ethics for digital ethnography, outlined by the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Franzke et al., 2020; Markham & Buchanan, 2012), it is recommended not to show content that could be traced online, and not to use specific examples or dialogues. Wordings and images are traceable, thereby risking exposing individuals. In this case, we studied a closed Facebook group with members only, which we had negotiated access to, i.e. the material is not public. Nevertheless, being a member you would be able to detect who is responding/talking. Therefore the quotes are presented with pseudonyms and faces are blurred when showing pictures. Although I also partly acted as a “lurker”, observing ongoing activities, conducting observations without consent, observations are not necessarily problematic as such (as discussed by Murthy, 2008). However, the screenshots are individuals’ somewhat private activities, and expressions represented visually. Now, screenshots are beneficial as they represent ongoing activities at a particular time. One can argue that the content, in this case, is not particularly sensitive, and that these individuals have made the decision to publish content. On the other hand, I give their (inter)action a meaning through my analysis. Using examples from data is how researchers prove the data, especially in qualitative studies.

The promised anonymity of the interviewees also potentially contributes to honest answers. As the interviewees’ responses are probed during the interviews, any misunderstandings can be minimised as they are able to elaborate on their answers and explanations, but on their posts as well, which have also positively influenced the credibility of the study. Altogether, I think that this contributes to the confirmability of the data.

The most recent report of the AoIR (Franzke et al., 2020) focuses primarily on ethical pluralism and cultural awareness and emphasises that ethics should be oriented around critical questioning rather than rules. When collecting online data, ethics needs to be addressed throughout the process, from the initial research design to the end of the project. It
demands a bottom-up approach, as there are new considerations to take into account with each case (Franzke et al., 2020). For example, when studying a fan community on- and offline, being open and transparent about our intentions, as well as ensuring fans’ privacy and preserving their anonymity, was essential.
Be mine: Results of studying engaging strategic communication practices

This chapter discusses the contributions of the thesis, based on the findings and conclusions of the appended articles, and in relation to previous research reviewed in the theoretical chapter. The overall aim of the thesis is to examine in which ways strategic communication practices are designed and enacted to cater to audience and fan engagement around music artist brands within the music industry.

Previous research suggests that when strategic communication is practised, it is something that communication practitioners do within an organisation and in relation to their environment and external stakeholders, to build brands and reach goals. Strategic communication practices should be emergent and flexible to be able to adjust to a dynamic environment. This thesis confirms that this is the case. Communicating a music brand is a matter of building relations and creating engagement among audiences, and be open to response and to what happens. Within this practice, music companies are increasingly organised to be agile, and practitioners are altering their competences and roles accordingly. By focusing on audience and fan engagement in relation to strategic communication practice, this thesis brings knowledge to how strategic communication is shaped by socio-cultural contexts, when opening up to co-creation with audiences.

This thesis will now delve deeper into aspects of practices, prerequisites, relations and systems of strategic communication within the music industry. The chapter is divided into three parts, related to the three research questions and based on the findings of the five appended articles, which are summarised in the introduction chapter. The first part discusses strategic communication practices responding to a complex and dynamic environment, with a focus on audience and fan engagement. The second part discusses experiences of engaging strategic communication practices:
both practitioners’ experiences of an engagement imperative, and audiences’ and fans’ experiences of engagement and co-creation. The third part discusses relations and power aspects within the music industry ecosystem, with a focus on the relations between the artist, the record company/management, the communication practitioners, and the audiences and fans.

**With every heartbeat: engaging in liquid and co-creative communication practice**

This first part responds to the first research question regarding the ways in which strategic communication practices are enacted and designed to cater for audience and fan engagement. I discuss the organisational and network aspects of the communication practices, followed by the communication practices and how they are strategised and steered, and end with discussions on the central guiding aspects of the practices, such as authenticity.

**Jointly organising, strategising, steering and communicating the music brand**

Based on the findings of the five appended papers, it is clear that music industry organisations use communication purposefully to present and promote themselves and engage in conversations and relations of strategic significance to their goals. The music artists are seen and treated overall as brands, whether they are small and new music artists or established and global ones. Even the smallest music artists see themselves as brands and are promoting themselves, especially on digital platforms, in an increasingly strategised way.

Seeing organisations as dynamic and liquid entities as well as social collectives and networks that are constituted and come together through communication (as in the perspective of the CCO) helps in understanding strategising aspects of contemporary music brands. Organisations come to life through communication events on the micro level – people communicating with people – as Schoeneborn and Vásquez (2017) suggest. The CCO perspective argues that communication agency and work is not to be reduced to a single profession or function as it is a process that cuts across the whole organisation. In relation, in this study it is clear that communication is at the centre of the record companies. All personnel are more or less involved in communication around music brands in various ways in
their daily work, some with specific tasks, as parts of different project groups or teams (for example, sales team, promotional team, radio team, TV team or data analysis team) or weekly meetings, etc. However, “everybody has ownership” of the communication practice. Everybody is involved in “doing fan engagement”. “All hands on deck” is demanded. The complex, highly strategised and digitalised communication arena where the music organisations act today demands that all personnel within the organisation focus on communication.

At the same time communication practices and connected products are professionalised and strategised (like a so-called “360 deal” structuring all the activities, products and revenue streams around an artist; see, for example, Marshall, 2013). Communication practitioners are still gaining legitimacy within organisations and the craft is increasingly professionalised by necessity. The communication and marketing practitioners are seen as key players and act as “spiders” within the organisation, and in relation to the music market and platforms. As a result of platformisation and datafication, new roles and work titles in communication and marketing have also emerged within music companies. If a communication practitioner before was only called a “marketer” or a “communicator”, they are now called “VP of strategy”, “creative director”, “head of digital marketing”, “head of insight”, “content creator”, “social media marketer”, “digital analyst”, etc. In their changing line of work, the communication practitioners also form and change the organisations and their processes.

There are many different actors that have a pronounced function within the communication chain involved in the strategic and planned communication and marketing. The strategic communication practices around music brands are therefore most often the sum of a joint effort by all the actors involved both within and outside the organisation (for example, management, PR and advertising firms). The different actors involved often have intersecting responsibilities and competences, and form a network of experts, consultants and suppliers of creative services (Nixon, 2011) with audience engagement and relationship building in focus. To be able to create their own promotional content and be able to react quickly to engagement and trends, instead of using advertising agencies, so-called “in-house bureaus” are also becoming increasingly common in larger record companies.
What kinds of communication practices are there within a music company? As Jarzabkowskis (2005) suggest there are different sorts of strategic practices with different purposes (organising and coordinating strategy, discourse enabling interaction, and creation of places/spaces/ opportunities to strategise), which is supported in this thesis. Communication practices are also many different practical activities on a daily basis. A communication practitioner’s workday is therefore never the same, although often focusing on areas such as content creation, data, advertising, etc.

...sitting and working at computers, communicating internally (with colleagues in the office and internationally) and externally (with radio stations, artist managers, Spotify, etc.). They do this communication mostly via email, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram and phone. (Field notes)

Article 2 shows that there are a lot of meetings, on both a daily and weekly basis: for example team meeting, artist brand meetings, international repertoire meetings and local repertoire meetings in which all the upcoming marketing and communication activities for artists are coordinated; and release meetings, in which the PR and communication for artists that is going to be released during the coming months is discussed.

Communication practices as a whole comprise day-to-day practices of communication and marketing, as well as value formulation and long-term strategic artist branding. There is always a long-term strategic plan in place (traditional linear and planned communication strategy). This is formalised by “identity” documents (with the artist’s “DNA”, genre and personality) and brand, communication and marketing strategies, including expected stakeholders/target groups and markets, as well as performance, promotions and positioning goals and guidelines. The strategies are most often formulated by artists, management and record company together both at the start of a cooperation and gradually over time), as well as tactics for how to proceed. Magnus, a Head of local marketing on a large record company describes this often entanglement of strategy and tactics:

“Artists are unique, they always are. There are 100 ways to work, it depends on genre, age and lots of different factors that come into play. But the preparatory work looks quite the same. We have a certain train schedule that we follow to achieve this. We are a big company, a big corporation. There are a lot of hands on a project. And there are many projects too. We have sort of developed a model and train schedule for how we work.”
Connected to these overarching strategies, plans and goals is the daily communication and advertising work on digital channels (web, social media such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and streaming services, etc.) and traditional channels (print, TV and radio advertising, sponsorship agreements, etc.), as well as personal connections (such as newsletters and personal offerings), all with relationship building and audience activity in focus. Following and monitoring artists’ social channels is something that is done daily, along with press contacts and creating content. If, for example, a contracted artist enters the building, the creatives might take the opportunity to take some time in the in-house studio for some content creation with the artist (short film clips, etc). The same goes when, for example, a new trend on TikTok is emerging, where it is possible to act fast and create new content around it. Magnus again:

“Aha OK, we see a TikTok trend. Then we need to amplify that trend right when it happens. Then we sit at this meeting and have people from all departments with us. We go into the scenario, come up with some creative ideas around it: what can we do, what can we build on it, which partners should we involve?”

The short-term communication work involves both adapting and executing the strategies and plans to reach set goals, but also to react and adapt to things that are happening around the artists and in society (on social platforms), to “spin” the brand and to create “presence”: “The strategy is to be dynamic. You have to continually do interesting things and change the strategy accordingly” (Stefan, CEO, manager and marketer). The strategy is therefore created and recreated both in the daily work and in strategy meetings, it is emergent (as described by for example Johnson et al., 2009).

**Connecting to and engaging (with) audiences**

The interplay between strategic communication and engagement is the overall focus of my thesis. Communication engagement building – where the communication practices are designed to build fan bases and invite and respond to audience activity – permeates nearly all communication work. The music industry is deeply involved in and dependent on the use of audience and fan engagement. As important as it is to strategically steer the brand via communication, it is to “be close” to and involve the fans, and to “join into the conversation, rather than interrupting it”, as John, VP of strategy, claims.
“We’ve worked a lot with trying to increase the engagement, to have a dialogue all the time, a continuous communication with the fans. To involve them” (Stefan, CEO, manager and marketer).

By engaging, interacting and co-creating, the fans function as a motor for the artist brand. The engagement is used as a lever for strategic communication’s goal reaching, i.e. engagement enhances the exposure and effects of the communication work without investing more. The communication practitioners are oscillating between encouraging and tapping into audience and fan engagement, and at the same time trying to steer and control the engagement to go in the right direction for the brand.

Participating in creating and offering interesting content within fan groups, and thereby facilitating fandom, is also vital. Article 4 explores how value creation processes take place in and around the context of a music fan community with the music artist, management team and fans as main actors, and develops an understanding of the intersection between so-called “fandom” and “brandom”. The music provider’s value facilitation relates to brandom and the way music actors produce resources (such as information, knowledge and skills) and the process of facilitating fans’ value creation.

There are three spheres interacting here: The fandom sphere represents fans’ own value creation and co-creation – for example, experiences of music and interactions between fans. In-between fandom and brandom there is a joint sphere with interaction and co-creation between the fans and the provider (artist/record company/ management). In our study, the Robyn fan group Konichiwa Bitches became an arena for interactions between the management team and the fans, which generated value for both the brand and the fans. The management team of Robyn appreciated how the fan group, and more specifically the superfans of the group, helps to market Robyn: “We are so lucky to have them. They are doing it so well. Like on top of everything,” says Tina, from the management group. Interaction could be, for example, a competition of the best meme of Robyn, engaging many fans and at the same lifted from the fan community into Robyn’s own Facebook page (the brandom); or dance parties and DJ sets around the artist during the pandemic held online, also enhancing and promoting the brand and at the same time creating personal experiences for fans. Here is an excerpt from an ethnographical field note:
It’s a late pandemic night in May 2020, and Robyn has invited to an online DJ set with a dance party on Youtube and Twitch (via Facebook and Instagram). On the screen you see Robyn playing music and dancing in her living room. She is singing along with the fans joining, right now 819 people. The comments under the screen are getting more and more: “So much love”, So fantastic thank you!”, “Yasss girl, give us what you live for!”. People are dancing to the music in their own living room (they say).

One central modus operandi for promoting audience and fan engagement is transmedia storytelling. These narratives are also central for the fans’ own actions and interactions, according to John, VP of strategy:

“To fall in love with an artist, make space in your heart for something bigger than a song, requires a little bit of effort, you know. And so I think, the important ingredients are the music itself and the conversation about the artist. Because at some point, the moment I listen to enough songs to think it’s worth investing in the artist, then I, if the artist doesn’t have an interesting story, a real story, an authentic story (…) then I’ll move on to something else.”

Results from the studies show that the overall focus for the music companies and brands is to create interesting and innovative content that can migrate between platforms as transmedia storytelling (Scolari, 2009; Zeiser, 2015) in order to create and “foster” audience reactions and to stimulate communication about a brand across platforms. Communication/marketing campaigns are often built around storytelling to be able to evolve across diverse platforms as well-defined narratives, via strategically planned and highly controlled activities (as suggested by, for example, Baym, 2012, 2018; Greenberg & Kates, 2014; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2021). Papers 1 and 4 confirm that an integrated transmedia marketing campaign creates multiple pathways across media for audience activity and is therefore based on the precepts of strategic planning. The strategically controlled communication and marketing content and campaigns, or “stories”, define paths for the audiences and fans to follow, interlinking social platforms and streamlining services by making use of their common and specific affordances. In Article 1, for example, we follow a launch of Taylor Swift’s record “Reputation”. Here, the story is the artist’s reactions to media exposure and pressure. In the song “Look What You Made Me Do” and its connected video, we also hear and see many symbols part of the story of the artist (for example, a snake, which is well known by her fans). These storylines as well as visual
keys are made a central part of the campaign spreading over media platforms as both campaign material and fan co-created material.

Several of my studies show that engagement entails a so-called “push-and pull” dynamic (as described by Hill, 2019) between producers and audiences/ fans, an ongoing negotiation that complicates the relation between them. Audiences and fans are pushed to consume and co-create media content, but also pull different content by selecting what they want to engage with and giving it meaning. In all the articles of this thesis, it is clear that audiences and fans are indeed deeply invested and engaged in music artists, and also respond to communicative calls around the artist brand – the fans choose, or pull, content that appeals to them: for example, they choose to be part of a competition or a game around an artist, or to co-create visual material within a record launch. At the same time, music companies play into specific strategic music industry practices (as suggested by Nieborg & Poell, 2018), by both fostering and steering fan activities and promoting fan experiences and interconnections among the fans. Data from Article 1 indicate that the management (try to) control and use fan practices to a large extent. However, it is a delicate matter, as fans may revolt and criticise certain actions: for example, they may question and boycott certain parts of the campaign, as we saw partly within the Taylor Swift campaign. From an industry perspective, music organisations and their communication practitioners needs to employ new activities carefully and align them with fan bases’ understandings and values. Thus, the fans’ creativity is a valuable resource for the management (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2009), who adapt content and campaigns to what fans are able to do and actually do (see for example Anderson, 2011; Fournier & Avery, 2011).

**Practising emergent, and agile and data-driven strategic communication**

In relation to audience engagement, the strategic planning and practice of communication is affected. Findings from my research show that a music artist communication strategy is always in place, but not always clearly followed. Results from Articles 1, 2 and 3 show that at all levels of the music industry, solid communication strategies for an artist’s brand are considered a necessity to help steer it in the right direction. In a dynamic and fast environment as well demanding relationships with external stakeholders, strategies become “solid grounds to stand on”. To be able to steer both
campaigns and audiences/fans in the right direction (in a wide range of social media platforms as well as traditional media), well-defined, integrated and planned activities are needed. The strategies are collaboratively formulated by all actors involved around the music artist (often including the artist). The communication work is also done jointly by a more or less formalised team of actors consisting of a project leader, communication and marketing professionals, content creators and data analysts – following both the overall formal strategy and shorter promotion plans and timelines.

The strategies made in practice in the daily work around the music brands, often resemble more short-term and operational tactics. Golsorkhi et al. (2015) and Jarzabkowski (2004, 2005), among others, claim that strategy is an ongoing accomplishment emerging through people’s practices. Article 2, which explores strategic communication practices within a record company, partly confirms this view. Although communication strategies are adapting, i.e. changing in relation to environmental inputs such as stakeholder engagement, there are still clear goal-setting and steering from communication practitioners and managers, etc. Strategies are emerging and changing, but are not an emergent strategies per se. Instead, strategic communication processes are done as Winkler and Etter (2020) claim: there is a coexistence between functional and emergent understandings.

Strategic communication is also a negotiation, as King (2009) suggests – an interaction between the actors involved, the context and the discursive patterns. This is prominent throughout my studies. An artist’s communication strategy is always in place, but not always clearly followed. Things happen that alter the plan. In Articles 1, 2 and 3 it is also clear that all actors involved see strategies as being bound to be both emerging and liquid processes and having much shorter timelines than before: a marketing strategy can be for a month ahead, or a week...

“Many believe that this campaign was planned a year or a couple of months in advance, for the outcome to be the way it was. It was fantastically successful in every way. But the first conversation we had about this was about one and a half months before. That says quite a lot about how the market looks today. The whole campaign idea came from one of my colleagues walking past me by chance. It’s crazy how it works. I wish I could say there was an even more strategic plan behind it, but he
walked by me by chance and said, ‘You know what, X will finally release new music.’ Then I had a flash idea” (Lisa, head of brand partnership).

Even if timelines are shorter, activities within a marketing campaign are formed – choreographed – to create paths for the audiences to follow, and are configured for specific responses allowing the communicators to control and “discipline” the audiences. However, this also requires being open to following engagement movements (see Article 1) in real time – for example, reacting to activities audiences do that might not be in the plan, and coming up with a new idea, new material, changing the plan accordingly. With shorter timespans, the strategy, the content and the communication tend to be more fragmented and open-ended. Platformised and engagement-directed communication requires flexibility and agility (as suggested by, for example, Greenberg & Kates, 2014; Van Ruler, 2019, 2021) to facilitate following, listening, reacting and adjusting to audience responses – testing new ways of interacting and improvising. This is also something that almost all interviewees talk about – following, reacting to and adjusting to audience activities. A CEO and communicator expresses this and presses on the fast pace of digital and social media:

“That’s what’s so great, that we can react and get stuff out that resonates with the fans, and be fast. Because the trend is moving incredibly much faster now than it did before. The window to do things can be very very short.”

The fact that social media platforms and music streaming services are boundaryless in terms of time and place, imposing more challenges on communication practitioners trying to follow audience flows. Abilities to act instantly yet according to plan become crucial. Several of the interviewees working with communication in Article 2 expressed a strategising approach characterised by flexibility, agility, openness, improvisation, participation, trying, testing and learning (much in line with what is suggested by, for example, Falkheimer & Heide, 2018; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Van Ruler, 2021). New content that resonates with the audience, and new strategic paths, are constantly created and tested.

Furthermore, the term choreographed engagement, presented in Article 1, is a useful term for addressing how transmedia marketing strategies in a cultural industry transform cultural expressions into contingent cultural commodities (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The strategic practices focus
on steering the fans in an anticipated direction within the marketing campaign (following paths as mentioned above). The daily communication work and marketing campaigns are designed to use communicative keys and behaviours established within fan communities (asking fans to act or create things around the music artist, for example films of themselves reacting to seeing a video of the artist’s new song for the first time), mixing platform affordances with fan practices. Contemporary transmedia marketing strategies therefore intersect with fan culture and platform logics to mobilise, discipline and control fans and simultaneously trace fans’ practices to identify and colonise new spaces – both digital and physical. Thus, choreographed engagement illustrates the control and disciplining of audiences and fans to conduct specific activities at particular times and places, in tandem with following and adapting to fan practices and where fan communities are present and active. The choreography represents the strategy, executed through curated steps of actions.

However, the choreography also allows improvisation from both the management and the audiences and fans. Their activities and co-creation (which now manifests as a central user-driven marketing strategy; see Gamble et al., 2019) – the choreography in practice – may be altered through the campaign by all involved. To keep steering in the right direction, according to the overarching strategy. The proposed concept of ambivalent strategic communication captures the contrasting structured and flexible approaches that characterise the practices of strategic communication. It is a matter of being both long-term and on solid ground, and at the same time acting in “sprinter” mode and being flexible in responding to what is happening around the music artist. To be able to adjust to, and at the same time keep strategising (when it is strategically right to do things) audiences’ practices and engagement are monitored. Data analysis departments, but also all sorts of communication practitioners, continually follow, gather and analyse data from engagement on the platforms. To explain the importance of analysing data, Anna (Head of Creative) said:

“We are getting feedback all the time on what we are doing, in real time, every minute (...) We need to live in the same world as the target group, to understand it and inject our presence there.”
In other words, adjust to audiences and to relocate to places where the audiences are. It is also considered very important to follow and understand audience engagement via manual real-time monitoring and analysing the actual activities on social platforms to see “what the fans are thinking, doing and talking about”, in the words of Anna.

There are constant goal-setting and measurement evaluations during both specific marketing campaigns and the daily communication work. Data tell the artist and the record company who is listening to the music, where they came from and what they are interested in:

“It’s about listening at scale and that’s where data analytics come into the picture. That’s where you look for patterns, and trends and movements and things, you know... To be able to then make sure that what I’m posting on social media is speaking to the collective sentiment rather than individual sentiment, we use a combination of tools: Google Analytics, dashboards, there’s plenty of systems for organising information. For me the question is: how do you take all of that raw information and turn it to something meaningful?” (Ali, head of insight, music PR firm).

This comment shows that the actors involved in the communication curate and adapt the social media content to its reception by keeping track of and following the audience’s actions and using related data. Although, this is a challenging task. Being open to unexpected things happening also means letting go of control, in relation to what is happening online around a music artist, which can be seen as one of the strategic tensions in the industry. There is a tendency for the music industry to try to comprehend, grasp, adapt to and at the same time manage the complex and fast-moving and challenging social web conditions, and the audience engagement within them. At the same time, there is a discourse of freedom, possibilities and do-it-yourself within the music industry, both for the artists and the audience, which makes it even harder to master the communication practice. Yet, there are most certainly differences depending on the level of the artist and the music company. When artists are signed to a larger music company, the level of dependence, professionalisation and communication strategy makes the artist more steered and less flexible in interactions with audiences, whereas more independent artists are often less strategic but more autonomous, more flexible and more personal. The more professionalised and institutionalised, the more strategised they are in advance.
Strategising a music brand requires the music company and the communication professionals to both control and let go in relation to the music artist, as they are often the one “speaking” on social media. As social media is built on instant reactions and conversations, the artist is often (but not always) involved in the communication, although an artist brand’s social media account is often co-managed by the management and/or communication practitioner involved around the artist. The record companies create road maps and social media calendars for the artist to follow. Some artists are free to post whatever social media content whenever they want; they are trusted to manage their social media accounts in a professional way and have often undergone education and/or coaching in content creation to suit the music brand and its audiences. Other artists are more steered, or not active at all, instead letting communication practitioners talk/write for them.

The question about who is “speaking” in social media is highly relevant. It is a question of authenticity. As social media is built on the affordances of interaction with other people and coming close to them, the notion of coming across as personal and “true” is important. Authenticity is both something perceived (Gilmore & Pine, 2007) and mediated (Enli, 2016) and can be strategically constructed. Holt (2002) states that “branded cultural resources must be perceived as authentic”, because if the branding efforts are seen as too commercially driven by audiences, the brand itself is seen as unauthentic (2002, p. 83), even if a marketing activity can create images of genuineness (according to Beverland, 2005). In line with this, I argue in Paper 5 that it is important to discuss different aspects of authenticity in relation to strategic communication, and its consequences for the communication practices.

The artist’s own voice is certainly central to establishing authenticity, as is inviting the audience into the artist’s life, although this can clash with the artist’s ability or willingness to follow a strategy and plan. The postings on social media need to resonate with the audience and align with the brand at the same time. Emergent strategised work handles this duality by both letting go of control and monitoring the conversation. Yet, this leaves the authenticity of the music brand contested.

This thesis argues that if an artist is seen as authentic, it increases the response from the audience and intensifies the type of dedication that is created and shown. Nevertheless, there seems to be a difference in how
artists and their surrounded management relate to and define authenticity, depending on whether they are more commercial and professionalised, or if they are small and independent (although these can also be professionalised). The authenticity aspect is raised as a core issue by many respondents in this thesis, although in different ways. The major actors (major record companies) use authenticity in a more strategic way, as something created (cf., Beverland, 2005). The independent actors (but also artists with more authentic “auras”) seem rather to emphasise the importance of “being real” and authentic, and stress the importance and truthfulness of a personal voice and appearance, and of authentic and personal meetings with audiences and fans.

The view on authentic connections is also shining through overall. It is a matter of building “real” understandings of, and relationships with, audiences and fans, or connecting in a way that appears authentic. See this quote from a global record company’s marketing representative:

“Instead of talking about we need 10,000 streams. Where they become like this... it becomes just numbers. We talk about who they are, what they do. Take it down to these soft words and values.”

This quote illustrates that authenticity is treated as something important, to engage with audiences in ways that resonate with them. At the same time, the concept of authenticity is a floating signifier – it is changing in a digital and promotional environment, which makes the endeavours of appearing “real” and personal complicated. As is the relationship building.

Do you really want me?

Experiences of engaging in strategic communication practice

This part relates to the second research question about how the actors within strategic communication networks, such as organisations and communication practitioners, as well as the audiences and fans, experience engagement and engagement work around a music artist brand. In this part, I discuss the implications of this dynamism of steering and adjusting to engagement. I am interested in what the experiences are of the communication strategist working within a digital participatory culture. I am also interested in whether the requirements to “produce” audience engagement affect the roles, competences, responsibilities and ethics of being a commu-
nication practitioner. To understand socio-cultural aspects of strategic communication practices, I think it is important to also talk to actors involved, not only study the practices themselves. Therefore, I have also studied experiences of both communication practitioners and organisations’ stakeholders (in this case audiences and fans) – as they are also actors within the communication practice network.

**Communication practitioners navigating the engagement imperative**

Strategising communication and adjusting to audience engagement requires flexibility and openess, as previously argued. Additionally, my studies combined show that most parts of the communication practice are affected by the participatory culture and the anticipation of active audiences. If practices before were more linear and focused on mass communication, they are now more emergent, agile and focused on relationship building. The normative ideals of commercial and strategically steered artist brands, via audience engagement and co-creation, have become prominent. All sorts of organisational communication are built on the precepts of creating engagement among their external stakeholders, to create interesting content and appear interesting to them, and to try to involve them in dialogue and co-creation around the brand in the brand’s interest.

The communication practitioners are supposed to constantly build stakeholder engagement – to be a social communicator (Phillips & Freeman, 2010), strive to include a dialogical “symmetrical communication” (Grunig & Grunig, 2006) and, meanwhile, strategically analyse the data that engagement brings. Building engaging brands is seen by the communication practitioners in this study as a challenging duty (Article 3) – an *engagement imperative* – and relying on audience engagement in the communication work is seen as the only way to do it. This is also support for such an imperative within research and other industries (for example journalism, see, Lawrence, 2018).

By addressing calls for understanding the socio-cultural aspects of strategic communication practices, this thesis argues that both the communication practitioners’ roles and responsibilities are altered by the engagement imperative. During work, the practitioners are socialised and learn what is expected (new skills, competencies, practices, work methods and tools) and which norms and values to adhere to (in accordance with
Gidden’s structuration 1984). In Article 3, interviewees also describe themselves being “forced” by the discourse in society and within the industry, as well as by management expectations within the organisation, to develop personal attributes making them able to operate in a dynamic environment and in dynamic relationships (as suggested by Mykkänen & Vos, 2017). Broad competencies and skills are required. Being a strategist, communicator, content creator and coach/educator for the artists, as well as a “wizard” on data analytics in their platform usage, all simultaneously, is more or less the norm. As is the skill of facilitating stakeholder participation and engagement, as well as being an engaged employee. Engagement as a concept can be an approach that “guides the process and interactions among groups”, according to Taylor and Kent (2014, p. 384). Taylor (2018) expands on this, suggesting ways for both organisations and publics to engage others in a responsible and empowering way. Within my studies I see some attempts to do this, and some discussions regarding responsibility, although this is rarely in focus among the practitioners.

When trying handle both internal and external demands on being flexible, creative, knowledgeable, engaged, participatory, effective and decisive (as suggested by, for example, Fuller et al., 2018), professional identity is affected, which is supported by the studies of this thesis. To be able to cope, constant learning is highlighted, even if there is often a lack of training (emphasised in Article 2). Music industry practitioners are generally highly trained in digital communication, content production and data analysis, but have no training in agile thinking and processes. It is often a case of learning by doing and a way of functioning without knowing how.

For a communication practitioner having to constantly engage with stakeholders (both external and internal) and adopt to constant flow and changes. The sensemaking enactment is represented by uncertainty, frustration, coping with the system, acknowledging advantages and understanding the process, as described by Thois Madsen (2022). For the individual employee it is a matter of coping with the prerequisites.

At the same time, there are not only expressed challenges but also positive aspects of the work: several of the practitioners interviewed expressed pride in being able to create successful communication and be part of creative teams in doing “good work” (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011) close to fans. Lisa (head of brand partnership) explains: “Check out that content! It was outstanding.” It is also often seen as exciting to work with
communication in the music industry, with a close connection to both music and the music fans. The view is that these kinds of jobs are desirable and that there are many applicants in line who are “hungry” for the jobs, which further increases the implications on the individual level of the engaging music industry.

Within the communication practices in the music industry, there is, as I see it, a clear shift to the individual in terms of responsibilities away from the chain of command toward the individual manager (as suggested by Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2021), which places a “heavy burden” and “makes personal training and resilience ever more important” (p. 140). This is also reflected in Article 3 of this thesis. Relatedly, it is also relevant to talk about the engaged and engaging communication practitioner. The individualisation and personalisation of both work practices and relations makes it important to address both positive and more negative implications of engagement for strategic communication. A positive implication is the dynamic and flexible work that is built in the discourses of contemporary work life overall. More negative is the imperative aspect, the duty to engage and to constantly evolve in a fast-paced and complex environment. Even flattening hierarchies can lead to negative aspects for the workers. Internal power struggles and more competitive organisational cultures have implications for communication practices and structures. From an organisational viewpoint, to bypass this and to be able to orchestrate communication with largely involved autonomous personnel, both communication work and strategising have to be inclusive and strategic imperatives are to be “imprinted” on crucial staff. In my view, the strategic aspect of communication is already at centre stage of communication practices within the music industry and seen as something that more or less everybody has to deal with, regardless of the level of operation.

Searching for a reflective and empathetic strategic communication practice

Another aspect I have encountered among the practitioners is the work discourse surrounding engagement – the attitudes towards relationship building and the audiences. Among the interviewees there are music industry workers that are focused on following and creating fan engagement with a clear relational focus, and others that are mostly focused on using fan engagement as an outcome and outlet for brand awareness and growth.
Partly this has to do with the kind of work role they have (a communicator can be more focused on relationship building than a data analyst, for example), but not only. Most practitioners are well aware of the different aspects of the industry prerequisites, although some do not reflect much of their work, their role and how they affect the audiences and fans. In relation to this, different dimensions of agency (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Giddens, 1984) among the communication practitioners can be seen in my studies: some tend to be less conscious about what kind of action patterns they reproduce and do not problematise, for example, their practice, roles or relationships with audiences. Some display more consciousness about relationships, the structuration and strategising processes they take part in and the discourses they form. Some are constantly evaluating their work and influence in real time.

For organisations, reaching out is hard work that must be done, and that has to be taught and understood. In this study, interviewees expressed a struggle between different requirements and discourses, for example regarding audiences. On the one hand, there are anticipations of active audiences and their endless interactions on social media. On the other hand, the audience is viewed as being steered by commercial interests, music companies and platforms. This reflects an asymmetrical view of the audiences suggesting that the power structures are still quite intact within communication. Communication practitioners and their organisations still manoeuvre the co-creative relationship with the audience. The goal of engagement is mostly effectiveness rather than participation, according to the results of this study. As such, the imagined audience modes and expectations of the audience engagement inform how the requirements to produce engagement affect the communication work and worker, and the norms and considerations they face.

These different aspects of the communication practitioner’s experienced working conditions and industry discourses also mirror implications for the practitioner work and identity, as well as the view on communication as a field. Certainly, communication practitioners are negatively associated with persuasion and manipulation (Hackley, 2007), following orders and, therefore, subordinating any ethical judgments of their own (Botan & Trowbridge, 2015). They can also be seen as “ethical guardians” (L’Etang, 2011) – calling for public opinion and building prerequisites for dialogue. With these opposing views and the challenges of the work at large, ethical
aspects of the profession are increasingly discussed (see, for example, Drumwright & Murphy, 2009). There is also a socio-cultural turn in ethical thinking in strategic communication, and research on communication practitioners as individuals struggling with the prerequisites of their work, such as ethical responsibility and considerations (see, for example, Tilley, 2015). The results of my study on experiences of communication practitioners show that this is the case; the communication practitioners often struggle with ethical responsibilities regarding their work practice as well as their related self-image.

Social media has brought new ethical challenges. Potential legitimacy gaps – when there is discrepancy between publics’ expectation and the social norm – are more apparent, and unethical behaviour is more easily discovered and propagated online. Manipulation and inauthenticity are seen as key ethical issues (L’Etang, 2011) within a promotional culture. However, ethics online is only modestly discussed in communication research (see, for example, Sebastião et al., 2017; Toledano & Avidar, 2016). This thesis tries to add to that discussion through problematising and lifting examples of a lack of ethical consideration within communication practices. Relatedly, this study points to the fact that important qualities and competences, such as empathy and ethics, are sometimes lacking within the music industry. There seems to be less place or time for being empathetic (i.e. focusing on the human behind the number), subjective or critical (as suggested by Gill & Pratt, 2008). This is also emphasised in the data of Article 3.

There is also a lack of ethical competence. The focus lies on the duty to create engagement, and this has ethical implications for both media workers and the audience. Some of the interviewees of my studies stated that they want to reflect ethical and empathetic behaviours (which reflects what Alvesson et al., 2008 and L’Etang, 2011 have suggested). However, when Valentini (2015) suggests that communication practitioners call for ethics within the organisation, this is seldom the case according to my study. Here, some interviewees point this out, implicitly meaning that it should be the organisational management that provides ethical learnings, but it does not. Lane and Kent (2018, p. 69) argue that many organisations treat audience engagement as “a means through which they can manage (and arguably manipulate) public opinion – something considered antiethical to the positive perceptions of participants and process of dialogic engagement”.

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I think that this is an important discussion to have, and for organisations to cultivate. I also argue that if the practitioners are constantly pushed to develop, change, go between views and morals and even bend rules, the communication professionals might not be prone to problematise the conditions they work within. When acting within a liquid organisation – whose environments and practices are increasingly complex, dynamic and demand faster actions and less time for reflection – both organisations and communication practitioners tend to underplay ethics. It might not always be clear for organisations what incentives there are for working ethically within communication and marketing practice, but this thesis makes a point on the importance of this kind of reflexivity in regard to practices of communication engagement. Behind the screens on the receiver end are human beings that organisations rely on. Reflecting on these aspects can be important in order for organisational practice to be socially sustainable over time, which is something that many of my respondents touch upon, directly or indirectly.

**Being an engaging and co-creating fan**

Here, I will focus on fans and their experiences of taking part in, and engaging around, a music artist-brand, partly answering the second research question. In this thesis, I am approaching organisations’ external stakeholders – customers, audiences, fans, etc. (termed differently depending on the field/discipline). I have chosen to focus on deeply engaged audiences and fans, as they are prominent stakeholders within the music industry. Fans are the focal point regarding both communication work and sales within the music industry, as they are seen as motors of the engagement around a music artist brand. Therefore, it is also important to bring in knowledge about fandom.

Fandom literature argues that fans are highly active around the object of their affection (Chung et al., 2018; Fiske, 1992; Gray et al., 2017) and have deep and positive emotional experiences (Baym, 2018; Duffett, 2013) – both personal and social (in fan communities that are like “families”). Research shows that digital social platforms have changed and intensified fan interactions (see, for example, Baym, 2015, 2018). Fans are therefore increasingly approached and used in branding and transmedia marketing, both as individuals and as communities. As a consequence of social media, fans are also given (and take) new roles as co-creators, filters, sponsors and
investors. The results of my research confirm that fans are profoundly engaged and engaging around music artist brands. The fan engagement around both the cases I have been following shows intensive and dynamic processes of interaction and exchange among fans, as well as between fans and artists and their industry representatives. The different fan roles are affecting their experiences of the engagement. For example, if they are approached as a filter or gatekeeper, the fan is seen as being (and feels they are) closer to the artist, which can come with both privileges and expectations.

In my research, I also wanted to elaborate on fans’ experiences of, and motivations for, being a fan and why they partake in activities around a music artist brand, as well as the relation between the different spheres in the ecosystem around an artist (record company, other companies associated and fan communities). So, what are the fans actually doing in relation to music and music artists? Music consumption entails listening to music, going to concerts, but also following music artists on social media and streaming platforms and connecting with other fans. Overall, my research shows that different levels of music audiences are active in the music artist setting in different ways. Ordinary audiences or consumers may, for example, go to a concert, “like” a post on Instagram or respond to queues in a marketing campaign, and interact with music artists and other fans. Fans who consume music and build relations with music artists have a stronger emotional attachment to the artists, which becomes an integral part of the (musical) experience, and they pay greater attention to detail and become more knowledgeable than an ordinary consumer. It is most often an ongoing practice. In Article 4, fans of the artist Robyn indicate that their engagement involves a feeling of shared identity and perceived values related to her – such as uniqueness, creativity, innovation and advocacy for human rights, but also autonomy, integrity and authenticity. Fans in the global Facebook fan group Konichiwa Bitches see themselves as the most engaged fans – the superfans of Robyn, who invest deeply in the artist, i.e. fans create and maintain hierarchies within the fandom.

The motivations for being a fan include, according to the study of Article 4, a strong feeling of affection for, and connection to, the artist and other fans. They also include a desire to display the fandom, to spread and co-create content with other fans and the artist – this may be, for example, sharing and commenting on social media content, or starting conversations
and arranging events around the music artist. These activities provide value for both the fan and the fan community (as well as for the music artist). As suggested by, for example, Jenkins (2006), transforming the personal fan feeling into social interactions is key for the fans, and this is also something my studies show. The fan community provides access to both the network and information, and offers a feeling of belonging (as suggested by Duffett, 2013), togetherness and a kind of family: “It’s an atmosphere that we kind of belong together” (Clara, fan).

It is interesting in this regard that although there are important and active sites for fans, these communities mostly function without an active internal organisation (Chang & Park, 2019). However, the artist management or record company seeks or establishes organised connections with existing fan communities, or even starts brand communities that collect fans. This was the case regarding the Robyn fan group Konichiwa Bitches (presented in Article 4). The group was created as part of a record marketing campaign in 2018 and became an arena for interactions between fans and the management team and among the fans, generating value for both the brand and the fans. When value creation occurred in the customer sphere – the fan group – that had nothing to do with the artist as a brand. Rather, it involved the experience of being a fan and coming together as fans, for example creating activities and sharing playlists with each other. The findings in Article 4 also reveal a partial migration from brandom to fandom, going from a brand-controlled fan community to a more independent one (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Guschwan, 2012), possibly due to strong fandom and closeness to the artist. It is something artist brands aspire to but is hard to obtain.

When an artist brand allows a fan community to create and co-create content in an open and often uncontrolled way (which can certainly also be part of a management strategy), a merger between fandom and brandom takes place that serves both the brand and the fan. Influential individuals within a fan community serve as inviters, spreaders and culture carriers. They might have other incentives for the engagement: being more invested, possessing deeper knowledge and a high fan social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). The top of the fan hierarchy, the superfans and executive fans, also functions as a key connecting point between the brand management and the fans, and as both gatekeeper and administrator of social media fan groups, thus helping to enable and enhance the brand. Being top fans
benefits both the fans themselves and the brand, according to Article 4. These fans have more agency (as described by Giddens, 1984), and have both hierarchical, rhetorical and social power within the fan community (Ihlen & Verhoven, 2015; Smudde & Courtright, 2015), as they are closer to the artist and the decisions around the brand. So in that sense they dominate the resources and communication, as well as influencing norms and “rules” within the fan group.

Although fan engagement is an individual and collective experience, it is also something that organisations are deeply dependent on and benefit from, as argued previously. From a fan perspective, though, it is important to be aware of what the fan activity brings to the industry, and to see through the industry endeavours, and some of the interviewees within my studies somewhat reflect on this, but do not problematise it very much further: “It’s really an authentic affection and probably it does of course promote her brand, but you know it’s less about that and more about our genuine love for her music” (Laura, superfan). Others do see their deep engagement as some kind of work: “I talk about her enough. She might as well pay me” (Kasper, superfan).

It has been suggested that there is a risk of organisations misusing fans via their engagement as working consumers or free labour (e.g. Andrejevic, 2004; Baym, 2015; Carpentier, 2011; van Dijck, 2009; Fast et al., 2016; Terranova, 2000). I think it is important to relate to these streams of thought in contrast to the more overly positive views of co-creation between organisations and external stakeholders such as fans. They and their activities in relation to music artists are de facto being used by organisations:

“One of the first clips we did with XX was a clip in a shopping mall. Then they weren’t that established and then we brought in a lot of extras, young girls and boys who were in the video clip, precisely because if you are in a video clip, you are more likely to share it when you are 15 years old (...) And then we took out 50 people with a following that we knew would want to share this clip, provided it turned out well. And it worked very well. (...) Something has to be engaging and exciting in this sort of thing, otherwise you don’t want to be involved” (Stefan, CEO, manager and marketer).

This quote and other results of my studies indicate that fans are seen as commodities by the industry (as suggested by Bolin, 2012), where brands use their creative and cultural capital and the data their engagement generate as valuable resources for their own needs (Arvidsson, 2006;
Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Smythe, 1981/2006). The fans that are being used are not paid, but might get “rewards and treats like first-hand information and content” (Bella, head of social media marketing). However, the results of my studies do not show that fans feel exploited or used, even if they understand that the artist is gaining from the engagement. In Article 4, many respondents point to the fact that they are aware of being part of the communication around an artist – they know when they are being used and not getting something in return, and then they might leave. Most often, though, they stay in place. The benefits of being a fan override the possible downsides.

However, there is some resistance among audiences and fans. When resistance in engagement sometimes occurs, for example within a marketing campaign (see Article 1), it is in the form of both disengagement and open questioning. Nonetheless, the fans’ engagement is always sought by the brand and is most often unpaid, regardless of where the fan is in the hierarchy. Even the executive fans leading and administering fan communities are unpaid, as are the superfans used as influencers, suggesting that the fans really are exploited in some sense. This is an important aspect of engagement. If the fans feel that they are used as well as not included or listened to, or that the communication and branding are too steered or unauthentic, there is a risk of ending up with less fan interest in interaction, which is of course problematic from the brand perspective. This can already be seen in some cases, with people overriding systems, platforms and “going back to basics”. For the artists, this implies losing contact with the audiences and fans, and for the music companies, losing customers, audiences and business.

**Don’t fucking tell me what to do: (power) structures of communication and engagement within the music Industry**

This part discusses the relations between the music organisation, the music artist (the brand) and the audience. I respond here to the third research question: What kind of relationships and negotiations develop and take place in a networked music communication ecosystem that is predominantly leaning towards producing and exploiting stakeholder engagement.
Structures of strategising and co-creation of communication

In this thesis, focus is on communication and the communication ecosystem of the music brand, which is based on a plethora of actors: the artists, the agents, managers, and within the record company, communicators, marketers, creatives and data analysts, as well as external advertising, PR and media consultants. In the system, the platforms, digital solutions, media companies, etc., as well as the audiences, are also important parts, as argued in this thesis. The music artist brand is placed in the centre, surrounded in a networked way by digital marketing entities, platforms and processes key for generating traffic to platforms and engagement on them. The micro-environment represents where necessary interactions take place to facilitate participation. The macro-environment represents external societal forces and structures impacting both input and output of the music market practices (see model page 14).

In Giddens’ (1984) view, systems can be seen as structures and their processes, produced and reproduced by human agency. All actors within the communication system of a music artist brand are acting within and reproducing the structure. For example, in Article 1 we see the record company and the management implementing a communication strategy for audience engagement, is building on clear systems of knowing, shared codes and meaning making. When doing this, the communicators also represent a system of control towards the audiences, facilitated through resources, which indicate an asymmetrical power relation. The communication practices within the campaign build on clear legitimation of the set-up by the actors involved in the communication work. Focus within the communication practices around a music brand is on adapting and adjusting to dynamic and rapid environments, and audiences in particular, as well as enabling engagement (as suggested by Denning, 2015). Yet, focus is also on trying to both steer and control the engagement that is “produced” by the audiences. This is both facilitated by the structure and reproduced by the actors within it (see also Article 2 and 4).

Another aspect of the structure is the prevailing preconditions, such as resources, rules, norms and facilities, for what actually happens. The results of this thesis suggest that the music industry and the engagement imperative constitute clear discourses and related norms for how the practices should be performed, as well as how audiences should behave. The fluidity of the industry and the digital and platformised environment also
represents both clear norms for how to relate to the practice (namely predictable conditions and therefore structurating) and at the same time instability regarding the practice itself. The structural resources are in this sense fewer. The work is in itself complex and challenging, and new types of skills and knowledge are needed all the time for the practitioners, to be able to follow digital engagement flows. This represents less capacity for agency, in Giddens’ view, but it could also be seen as something empowering for the audiences. As they are experiencing music and relating to music artists in constantly new ways and on new platforms, the music industry is more or less “running behind” them, trying to understand, engage with and master their engagement. Nevertheless, the engagement flows are real people engaging in music consumption from their own perspective, on their own terms, not serving the music brand per se, and therefore not controllable.

As a result, the communication ecosystem or network of a music organisation invested in building control mechanisms informed by data, needs to recognise that it is not fixed. Instead of only trying to control the flows of activities (in line with overall goals) both within the organisation and outside (in relation to the stakeholders), it is not far-fetched that to consider the people involved, their social relations and cultures, would also be valuable for the industry.

If we consider the ecosystem as the manifestation of a structure, in the sense of Giddens (1984), it is built on and dependent on the actions and conceptions of the actors within it. Therefore, these can also question and even change the practices and norms of the ecosystem or structure. However, as regards agents’ opportunities to change the system through actions and interactions, as Giddens suggests (1984), I see little change happening in this study. Many interviewees point to the fact that they want, or ought, to consider alternative modes of actions, but that they lack the opportunity, legitimacy, competence and time to be able to evoke change. The context and societal and industrial discourses of digitalisation, platformisation and marketisation also makes it difficult to do something beyond the expected or change modes of actions. There are many aspects of platformised and networked communication settings that are hard to alter:

“Although it’s a fact that you need to get something out of the network to be in it, it’s also clear how little you understand of the dynamics online and how little you can influence them” (Stefan, CEO, manager and marketer)
Power aspects are increasingly discussed regarding strategic communication. In this thesis, I am interested in the interplay and power relations between the music organisation, the music artist and the audiences/fans. According to Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977, 1990), there is a dynamism, duality and interchangeability, as well as an even distribution in powers, between structures and agents. This is the case in my thesis, both between the music company and its communication ecosystem, its practitioners and cooperation partners, as well as its external stakeholders such audiences and fans.

At the same time, newer adaptations of structuration theory suggest that there is a hierarchical distribution of opportunities for action, which also depends on inherent power aspects, etc. This tends to be the case between the music company and its customers and audiences, as well as within a music industry organisation. There are power relations within the system, for example represented by positions within the organisation, how influential an employee is, which personal skills an employee has etc., relating to hierarchical power, as suggested by Smudde and Courtright (2010). There are VPs, managers and communication practitioners at different levels, with chains of command. Here, the managers have more power to create and steer brands, but also to influence different types of practices. At the same time, in a modern-day dynamic and fast-paced communication practice, all communication practitioners have the mandate to operate according to a plan and strategy or not, i.e. with power in steering brands and their communication on a daily basis.

Around the organisations, there are also power hierarchies – in relation to different cooperation partners, for example advertising agencies, media bureaus and other brands, as well as social media and streaming platforms. The datafication of communication work makes, for example, both the organisations and their practitioners dependent on data flows, without “owning” the data or the platforms used in data analysis. The fact that data are gathered by platforms and handed over to organisations via systems like Google Analytics or social media business pages makes the platform an important agent in the structure of the music industry. One additional aspect here is the platforms’ affordances, regulations and built-in limitations that ultimately affect the communication practices – for example,
platforms’ lack of transparency while respecting (or not) ethical norms and guidelines.

Hierarchies are also prominent in relation to audiences, as discussed earlier. These are far away from the music artist and the music organisation, as well as from opportunities to influence the affordances of the digital platforms, and in that regard, therefore, from power. In theory, audiences can get close to music artists on social media, but in practice this is most often not the case. It is hard for audiences to stay off the digital platforms and the data circuit (and what their data represent for organisations). Audiences are also seen as tools and key resources for strategic communication, and as such they are approached, cultivated and targeted in a “smart” way (see Article 2). The results of this combined are power relations between organisations and audiences that remain quite uneven, as I see it. The audiences are pursued, used and commodified, which also makes them exploited.

At the same time, there is negotiation at play. This negotiation between the different actors involved in the communication and engagement around a music artist also represents a social power (Smudde & Courtright, 2010) – people acting together through communication to produce brands, organisations and ultimately societies. In Articles 1, 2 and 4, results show that there is a complex relation between management control and audience and fan agency across diverse spaces. It is a give-and-take process – or push-and-pull interaction – where the music industry tries to start and stir engagement, and the fans react, develop their own interpretations and select which aspects they deem worthy of their engagement. In relation, the industry carefully choreographs activities and movements to align engagement with marketing goals to build sustainable fan-artist relations. It is therefore not easy to say that hierarchical power is still only asymmetrical or uneven. This model visualises the relational and influential flows between the actors within the communication ecosystem of a music artist. It also shows that in a networked society, power is – or at least partly is or could be – more evenly distributed (e.g. Benkler, 2011).
Figure 3. Relational flows of music communication practices.

It is also important to say that fans engage in and relate to a music artist supposedly because they want to. In doing this, they are of course having agency; they want to contribute to the culture around the music artist, and the fandom (see Article 4). They are also often seen by the communication practitioners as having impact and power, according to findings in Article 3. The audience is generally seen as getting better and better in creating content and in being selective in their approach. Following Giddens’ (1984) logics, audiences and fans have power when they choose or refuse to engage around an artist brand. They are knowledgeable and constantly adjust their practices to achieve their purposes (listening to music and coming close to the artist). This kind of power represents a rhetorical power, as suggested by Smudde and Courtright (2010).

Within fan communities, there are also hierarchies and negotiation of rhetorical power, as we see in Article 4: the senior and expert fans within the group acquire a kind of discursive power (as discussed by Obiegbu et al., 2019) and establish, shape and control how the other fans in the group read and interpret their music idols. The fan cultural and social capital is also a kind of power – fans with the highest capital within the fan group become superfans and/or so-called “executive fans”. They often get closer access to both the artist and the management, feeding into the organisational goals.
and practices, by helping to stir up activities within the fan group and by suggesting or creating activities.

Finally, synthesising and zooming out, on the macro and societal level of music communication, we see that social structures are building on the dynamics of negotiation between all the actors, but also on heavily but not static asymmetric power relations. Platforms are, for example, becoming increasingly powerful in relation to both organisations and countries and, as argued earlier, at the same time harder to impinge or go around for all those using them. There are in many aspects uneven power relations between organisations and audiences. Nevertheless, these power relations are fragile and contested by both communication practitioners and audiences.

As social structures are open-ended and forever being changed by the actors, according to Giddens (1984), they are fragile, from an organisational viewpoint. In this thesis, I argue that we clearly see that not only does communication around a brand rely on audiences, but participatory communication around music artists is built on the fact that audiences and fans want to interact with, and come close to, the music artists and also accept the set-up of being seen as partners in music brands. The communication around a brand also relies on practitioners accepting the prerequisites of being conductors of the choreography of the fan dances around the music, as well as data obsessions. Both practitioners and audiences are enabling the relations – both getting what they want according to the discourses of engagement. In doing this, the actors are creating and recreating the structures and power relations in the music artist brand communication ecosystem.
Concluding remarks

The overall aim of this thesis is to explore strategic communication practices in relation to audience and fan engagement in the music industry. The findings and conclusions from the appended papers, in relation to previous research, have been conceptualised into an overall contribution made by this thesis.

Contributions
Exploring strategic communication practices in relation to music audiences and customers, this thesis adds empirical results and theoretical perspectives to practice-oriented and emergent strategic communication in the music industry, but also for organisations at large. During my work on this thesis, some tensions have emerged from the studies and the empirical material. First, there is a tension between a promotional and a participatory culture. Centring communication practices around audience and fan engagement presents organisations and their practices with challenges. It is not possible to know how audiences will act around a music brand. As audience engagement is essential in contemporary communication practices, audience activity has implications for the communication strategy and the communication work. It is clear that audience engagement is used as a lever for strategic communication and its endeavours to reach its goals. The activity is also monitored in order to both adopt the strategies in flexible and agile ways and to stay in control.

Another prominent tension is that dependence on engagement within communication practices also places organisations in the lap of the digital platforms, which own the data the engagement accumulates. The dependency on datafied engagement within the communication practices also implicates the actors involved, i.e. the communication practitioners, other organisational actors, the musicians and the audiences, as well as the relations among these actors. When someone owns the platforms and the
data, another owns the brand and initiates the communication, and yet others are recipients of the communication and engage around the brand, communication practices are de facto not so dialogical or symmetrical.

To address these tensions, this thesis makes a number of concrete theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions, in relation to the examined tensions. This thesis provides an extended theoretical understanding of communication engagement. The first theoretical contribution regards what I call an engagement imperative. Communication practices and external stakeholders’ (in this case consumers, audiences and fans) engagement are entangled. The focus on making and keeping audiences and fan communities active around brands is indeed prominent within the music industry and for organisations at large. Communication practices focus on inviting, or even demanding, engagement around the brand in various ways, and following engagement round a marketing campaign or a brand. Yet, many of the practitioners involved express a duty to create engagement, despite often lacking competences and an in-depth understanding of engagement. This pressure is both external and internal, and ultimately even the identity of the communication practitioners’ is affected. If the communication practitioners feel that they are trapped within an imperative that challenges them and requires constantly new competences, the consequences of constant engagement focus are not only positive for organisations.

The second central theoretical contribution regards the implications of a datafied and platformic engagement on strategic communication practices. These practices are increasingly adapted to, and profoundly altered by, platforms, social media and data-centric processes. In this sense, platforms become powerhouses, and as such, they and the data connected to them cannot be circumvented by organisations, but are challenging to relate to. Also, new competences, skills, roles and processes are needed to adapt to and to handle this, which puts pressure on an already intense and complex work practice. For an organisation and a communication practitioner, being flexible and open to change is considered essential to being able to sustain adapted, emergent and agile communication practices with the dynamic and datafied outside world, more specifically here audience and fan engagement. This platformic and data-centric music industry does indeed serve both organisations and audiences in many ways, as argued before. Yet, it also represents a practice where the quality of engagement (from both an
organisational and audience perspective) and the relationships between organisation and stakeholder are exposed and perhaps harmed. When audiences and fans are always monitored, strategically steered and controlled, they are instrumentalised and reduced to data points in the organisational quest for engagement. In a way, audiences are increasingly seen as masses and “dupes” again. A practice relying on strategic use of data from engagement is potentially alienating itself from the people the data are representing. The digital platforms have intensified this tendency and the field is now structured in new ways, making the power relations even more asymmetric, to the advantage of the platforms. Maybe it is not possible for commercial organisations and their communication practitioners to leave the organisational goal of utilising the engagement aside and enter into truly open dialogue. Yet, the striving for dialogue with humans, instead of only focusing on data, is key for a dialogic communication practice.

The third theoretical contribution regards the strategic practices of following, adapting to and improvising around and in relation to engagement – what we call choreographed engagement. This concept addresses how audiences are controlled and steered in an anticipated direction within a marketing campaign or around a brand. Marketing campaigns are designed to use communicative keys and behaviours established within fan communities, mixing platform affordances with audience and fan practices. Audience engagement is monitored and often also adapted in partly improvised ways. This way of working also relates to and expands on the strategy-as-practice perspective and agile work approaches, and this thesis provides empirical understandings about how communication practices are done and orchestrated, or choreographed. The choreography in this case is the strategy, and the improvisation is being flexible within the ramifications of the strategy. This represents an ambivalent strategic communication with contrasting structured and flexible approaches that characterise the practices of strategic communication.

Additionally, I also make empirical contributions that deepen theoretical understandings about audience and fan engagement, specifically within the music industry, and in relation to strategic communication. This thesis provides a deeper understanding of the motivations and values on which audiences and fans base their relationships and fandom – both values developed within fan communities and in relation to the music artist and their brand, as well as hierarchies of fandom. Audiences, and more
specifically fans, are generally very invested, deeply engaged and express their sentiments in relation to the artist, both as individuals and as communities. Their activities are often connected to the commercial and communicational aspects of the music brand, and exploited as cultural commodities. A distinction between fandom (independent fan value creation), brandom (music artist and management’s value facilitation) and the joint sphere of co-creation of value and interaction contributes to understanding why organisations should adopt more complex views on consumers, audiences and fans. For organisations to utilise only marketing perspectives on the relationship with fans can be counterproductive. Facilitating fan value processes, letting the fandom grow stronger in itself and creating a better understanding of fans, via integrating learning processes within the organisation around fandom, is important. In relation, aspects of authenticity regarding strategic communication and audience and fan engagement is important to highlight. Authentic communication engagement represents people’s desire to have real and strong experiences and connections, because they want to, not because they respond to a call from a marketing campaign. However, the concept of authenticity is potentially hijacked and even misused within strategic communication to create more audience engagement and closer relationships. Focusing on audiences and their engagement as merely motors in marketing campaigns and for branding also has implications for the relationships between music artists and their audiences. Grounding the relationships on merely commercial and metric aspects creates bonds between artists and fans that are more fragile. Less authentic engagement and contact between musicians and fans can lead to audience disconnection and also to less co-creation.

This thesis also makes a contribution regarding the reproduction of structures: it is argued in this thesis that instrumental strategic communication practices and connected platformic engagement are cementing existing power relations. Even if the ecosystem of music markets is networked and agency is spread among many (audiences included), and an ideal of co-creative and symmetrical relations is strived for within communication, this thesis argues that many aspects point to a system with inherent uneven power relations. Deeply strategised and fluid brands are therefore ultimately harming relationships on which they are dependent. The structure of the music industry is reproducing itself constantly through its actors; via shared codes, norms and legitimisation. Changes to these
uneven relations of the system are possible, but not realised. On the one hand, actors are reproducing the system; on the other, the actors within the system are also affected. Even if audiences’ activities around music brands build on deep and positive emotion and engagement, the audiences are at the same time exposed, steered and exploited by organisations seeking profit and control via their strategic communication practice. While exercising this practice, the communication practitioners are also somewhat trapped and potentially harmed. Human aspects, such as respect and mutuality, are downplayed on all levels. Commercial and strategic aspects of the organisations and societies are made superior, with platformic prerequisites of the network as a basis. In this sense, strategic communication practices have implications for the systemic and societal level, by exerting a reproductive force or power on the socio-cultural aspects of the society as well as the organisation.

Lastly, to explore a complex promotional setting and its socio-cultural aspects, the methodology is key. Within the work of this thesis, we have seen it as important to engage with both communication practitioners and audiences, as well as finding ways to understand the flows of the ecosystem that are largely digital and platformised. The methodology of this thesis is therefore in itself a contribution (presented in greater depth in Ryan Bengtsson & Edlom, 2021). Along with a qualitative and partly ethnographical approach, with observations and interviews, we developed new data collection strategies, such as reversed engineering and live capturing, and applied different analytical approaches to understand the complex flows of digitalised communication engagement within the music industry.

**Lessons for the music industry**

Within my thesis work I have come across an industry that is creative, in constant development and attractive to both its workforce and its customers and audiences. Nevertheless, I have argued, it is an industry that does not always consider the consequences of its practice for its practitioners or stakeholders. In this section I will discuss some aspects concerning strategic communication practices in relation to the music industry that in my view are important to talk about and reflect on. The findings of this thesis apply, in my view, to all kinds of organisations taking advantage of customer and audience engagement.
When the engagement aspect is so central and entangled in the organisational practices, it is also important to view engagement as serving the organisation, the communication practitioners and the audience, as well as treating the engagement practices as contributing to genuine dialogue. To move forward from the fact that commercial and strategic aspects are superior and to counteract tendencies that “softer” values and people orientation are forgotten or overridden, I am suggesting certain considerations for the industry.

Two central aspects are responsibility and ethics. My studies show that individual responsibility regarding communication engagement is only discussed in relation to being a good worker and/or a successful communicator. However, within an organisational structure, the practitioners both create and recreate the structure in their daily work and discourses. The prerequisites of strategic communication and communication engagement are that practitioners follow strategies, plans and regulations, as well as a “best” practice and a practice discourse. Nonetheless, many of the interviewees of my studies bring concerns over responsibilities and ethics to the table, although they also describe a lack of organisational interest and responsibility, as well as discussions, competence and industrial interest.

I argue for more discussions about ethics in communication practices in general, and more specifically within the music industry, to help build a more sustainable ecosystem and communication practice. Seeing communication engagement mainly as a way to manage and steer audiences’ actions is potentially anti-ethical. To build a more sustainable organisational work practice, I argue that clearer ethical guidelines regarding what communication practitioners can and cannot do are needed. Opening up to questions about what happens to the practitioner when being constantly pushed to see audiences as data points and even commodities – when stakeholders are instrumentalised – is important for organisations.

I also argue that when communication practitioners adapt communication practices to be emergent in relation to engagement, more reflection on the socio-cultural implications that adapting to audience engagement has on all involved actors is needed. It is important to go from doing calculative communication work to a more reflective doing. Yet, if the communication practitioners see themselves as trapped within an engagement imperative that may be harmful for both themselves and the audiences, and the audiences at the same time feel steered and misused, the music industry is
potentially harmed not only in the long run. Continuous discussions about the actors’ own role and agency within the structure are important, but also the implications of the complex and highly commercialised and digitalised structure, with both the platforms and the music organisations in the driving seats.

I would also suggest that the music industry engages even more with customers, audiences and fans – for real. Most of the interviewees of my studies express a functionalistic view on audience engagement in social media. The fans are assets doing activities in line with organisational goals. This view does not represent real dialogic engagement. In line with this, the music industry loses sight of the most central aspects – the creative making of music, the musicians, the fans and the actual relations between them. Of course, the communication practitioners are working for the industry, not for the audiences. Yet, focusing more on the people behind the numbers, instead of focusing and relying on data for the gain of the brand, is important for several reasons. Not least, it would bring more sustainable relationships with the customers and fans, when they will not feel or be as exploited, but instead more involved and humanised. It is also important because of the fact that the social media and platforms of today might quickly change and others will certainly come. The heart of the matter for organisations is – again – the relationships, not the tools and its followers, and their “likes”. Engaging in open and authentic dialogues around music artists means giving up control, or at least some power, in order to create benefit for both the organisation and the audience.

Being a strategic goal, audience engagement requires considerations that might appear counterintuitive for organisations. Certainly, communication engagement can be carried out in an unethical and unreflective way, as long as it serves organisations and produces desired outcomes for the industry. But, one might wonder how “unsustainable” the relationships can be within communication engagement before it stops producing the desired outcome. This thesis cannot answer that question, but it points to the pitfalls of an unsustainable communication engagement practice for organisations, where both individuals and the organisation, as well as its legitimacy and worth, might be damaged.
Limitations and future research

When working on the present thesis and the appended papers, a number of topics emerged for further research. The focus of this thesis has been on communication engagement within the music industry. I believe that its results may be applicable and transferable to other contexts working with communication and having focal external stakeholders. However, being focused on only one illustrative example (the music industry) and two cases within (two female artists with fan communities that go far above and beyond the ordinary audience) can be a limitation. Music fans as audiences are indeed often deeply engaged and entangled with music brands, perhaps more than other customers with many other kinds of brands. This implies that the relationship between the audience and a music company might also be different from other organisations. I therefore recommend that the results of these studies should be explored beyond the music scenario into other organisational and brand contexts. As the relations between an organisation and its customers or audiences are always in focus regarding communication, the engagement imperative and the platform-based and data-centric use of audience engagement also merits investigation in other contexts.

Questions about implications on both an individual and societal level of the imperative of engagement also need more consideration overall. If communication practitioners feel trapped in an imperative and the audiences feel used, what could this lead to? The results of this thesis do not answer this question in any depth, but argue for more research on the implications of engagement imperatives. A further ethical exploration and discussion about strategic communication in relation to audience and consumer engagement, and clearer ethical guidelines regarding what communication practitioners can and cannot do, are important to keep evolving in both the academic and the professional strategic communication field. A possible follow-up study could examine, for example: a) what ethical guidelines there are; b) how they are viewed by professionals; and c) the discourse around them to see whether they might be subject to change.

Overall, this thesis ties into questions about social sustainability within communication practice in general and in the music industry more specifically, regarding both the practitioners and their external stakeholders. To this end, another way of developing the industry would be to explore and innovate solutions that have the potential to make both the
communication practices and the music consumption more socially sustainable. Datafication is permeating our society and is key for organisations. Yet the engagement imperative as well as the data focus potentially lead to a misuse of the audiences’ and fans’ engagement and activities, as argued in this thesis. If you consume music and relate to music artists today, you most probably are on digital platforms. A practice relying heavily on platforms and strategic use of data and algorithms is therefore also potentially alienating itself from the people the data are representing, and potentially leading to stress and anxiety both among audiences and organisational employees. I argue that there is a possibility for a communication practice truly interested in those it is relating to. For this, there is a need for further contextualisation and a deeper understanding of social, economic and cultural aspects, as well as continuing to get closer to the actors within the system, which I partly set out to do with this thesis.
References


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## Appendix

### List of interviews

**Communication/marketing practitioners**

*Anonymised respondents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Title and Affiliation</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>Head of insight, Music PR firm</td>
<td>March 4, 2016</td>
<td>46:01 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stefan</td>
<td>CEO and marketer, independent record company</td>
<td>March 8, 2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johan</td>
<td>CEO and communicator at PR firm</td>
<td>April 11, 2016</td>
<td>55:10 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Vice-president of Strategy, global record company</td>
<td>May 27, 2016</td>
<td>38:20 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomas</td>
<td>Manager, communicator and brand executive, independent management</td>
<td>June 20, 2016</td>
<td>29:42 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>Manager and communicator/marketing, independent management</td>
<td>August 18, 2016</td>
<td>22:30 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leila</td>
<td>Communicator, club organiser</td>
<td>March 29, 2016</td>
<td>53:10 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anders</td>
<td>Head of A&amp;R, music distributor</td>
<td>June 28, 2016</td>
<td>38:15 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matilda</td>
<td>Communicator, export organisation</td>
<td>Dec 6, 2016</td>
<td>32:41 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Head of brand partnership, global record company</td>
<td>May 9, 2018</td>
<td>59:58 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>Marketers and digital content creators at management</td>
<td>Feb 20, 2020</td>
<td>54:16 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trudy</td>
<td>Group interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>Head of social media marketing, Indie record label</td>
<td>Feb 24, 2021</td>
<td>41:41 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>Senior content creator, global record company</td>
<td>Feb 25, 2021</td>
<td>31:14 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Head of creative, global record company</td>
<td>March 1, 2021</td>
<td>46:51 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>Manager, independent music manager</td>
<td>April 16, 2021</td>
<td>44:29 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tilda</td>
<td>Director of artist and label services</td>
<td>Jan 26, 2022</td>
<td>52:35 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Magnus</td>
<td>Head of local (marketing and brand executive), global record company</td>
<td>May 17, 2022</td>
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**Music artists, musicians and bands** (alone or group interview)

<table>
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<th>Title and Affiliation</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
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<tr>
<td>Small independent pop music group</td>
<td></td>
<td>April 15, 2016</td>
<td>53:28 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singer-songwriter, licence deal with record company</td>
<td></td>
<td>May 10, 2016</td>
<td>28:44 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pop music group, represented by major global record company</td>
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<td>May 25, 2016</td>
<td>28:44 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small independent metal music group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium-sized metal music group, with record label</td>
<td></td>
<td>June 28, 2016</td>
<td>39:19 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singer, independent rock music group</td>
<td></td>
<td>June 23, 2016</td>
<td>38:55 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guitarist, well-known/big rock music group with record company</td>
<td></td>
<td>June 27, 2016</td>
<td>45:07 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent pop music group</td>
<td></td>
<td>March 2, 2021</td>
<td>35:48 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent female pop music artist, self-releasing</td>
<td></td>
<td>April 6, 2021</td>
<td>35:31 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June, pop music artist with major record company deal</td>
<td></td>
<td>April 7, 2021</td>
<td>39:07 min</td>
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**Fans**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>superfan</td>
<td>May 26, 2019</td>
<td>32:46 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulrika</td>
<td>superfan</td>
<td>June 11, 2019</td>
<td>29:14 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>superfan</td>
<td>July 7, 2019</td>
<td>39:32 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>superfan</td>
<td>July 8, 2019</td>
<td>28:09 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kasper</td>
<td>audience</td>
<td>Oct 1, 2019</td>
<td>14:47 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julio</td>
<td>audience/fan</td>
<td>Oct 2, 2019</td>
<td>54:56 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasper</td>
<td>audience/fan</td>
<td>Oct 2, 2019</td>
<td>54:56 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>audience/fan</td>
<td>Oct 6, 2019</td>
<td>43:46 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>superfan (group interview)</td>
<td>Dec 12, 2019</td>
<td>62:11 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>superfan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>superfan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Show me love

For the music industry, audiences’ engagement around music artists is central to building and communicating artist brands. Currently, we are witnessing new communication approaches to track, foster and commodify audience engagement, partly via data-driven processes. This thesis studies how the music industry’s strategic communication practices interplay with and steer audience and fan engagement.

The thesis applies qualitative and ethnographic approaches and socio-cultural perspectives. Drawing on practice and structuration theory, critical questions are asked about the social consequences of communication engagement and an engagement imperative – for both individuals and organisations. Results indicate that the contemporary, digitalised music industry demands communication practices that are at the same time strategic, professionalised, emergent, agile and co-creative. The study highlights implications of such practices, in terms of changing professional competences, ethics and power relations that support and are (re-)produced through the engagement imperative. In sum, the thesis is aimed at extending our understanding of how strategic communication practices respond to, and change in, a seemingly liquid, yet at the same time carefully orchestrated, communicative context.
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