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# Employee Communication Responsibility: Its Antecedents and Implications for Strategic Communication Management

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## ABSTRACT

Although organizations increasingly acknowledge the communicative importance of employees, and increasingly frame communication as an employee responsibility, communication responsibility remains an unexplored topic in strategic communication research. To address this gap, this study introduces the concept employee communication responsibility and offers insight into factors influencing employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. Data were obtained from 4,726 employees working in ten Swedish organizations. Half the sample (2,244) was used for exploratory factor analysis that enabled the identification of a smaller number of factors to construct a model with four hypotheses, and half the sample (2,482) was used to test the proposed model through structural equation modeling (SEM). Hypotheses formulation was informed by previous research examining factors influencing employees' communication. The study shows that all tested factors, internal communication climate openness, immediate supervisor communication, top management–employee communication, and perceived importance of communication significantly contribute to employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. Thus, the study provides knowledge useful to researchers interested in employees' communication, and to strategic communication practitioners responsible for internal communication and employees' communication.

## Introduction

Contemporary management trends have increased demands on individual employees to take greater responsibility for everything from quality and efficiency, to the brand of the organization. Furthermore, societal developments have generated organizations characterized by “uncontrollability, chaos, flexibility, and disorganization” (Alvesson, 2004, p. 6). In these organizations, described by Alvesson as postbureaucratic and knowledge-intensive, it is expected that every employee actively contributes to organizing processes. Therefore, communication is increasingly perceived as a core competency for all organization members.

In line with this, strategic communication researchers have started to pay attention to the importance of employees for the external and internal communication of organizations. Although employees' importance for the communication of organizations has been acknowledged by strategic communication and public relations research for almost three decades (e.g., Grunig, 1992), and several researchers label employees as “strategic constituents” (Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011), most researchers agree that employees traditionally have been viewed as passive recipients of communication activities rather than strategic communicators whose communication activities have

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consequences for the organization (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Heide, von Platen, Simonsson, & Falkheimer, 2018; Jo & Shim, 2005; Mazzei, 2014). Furthermore, several researchers have pointed to the fact that employees' communicative role and communication still is an understudied aspect of organizations' strategic communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Mazzei, 2014).

While few have studied employees' communication, there is no shortage of arguments for why employees' communication is so important to consider. Examples of provided arguments is that it improves the competitive advantage of the organization (Mazzei, 2014), that it is significant for organizational effectiveness and success (Kang & Sung, 2017), that it influence the reputation and organization-public relationship (Kim & Rhee, 2011), and that it is essential for the communication process through which the organization is constituted and reproduced (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). Furthermore, employees' also pose a potential threat to the organization as their communication can impact the organizational reputation in times of crises (Opitz, Chaudhri, & Wang, 2018). The most recent arguments for the communicative importance of employees have been brought forth by researchers interested in developing theory about the communicative organization, "a post-industrial approach to organizations and society, where communication is a core for all forms of organizing, strategizing and managing" (Falkheimer et al., 2017, p. 94) and in which it therefore becomes essential that employees understand their communicator role (Zerfass & Franke, 2013).

Outside academia, *responsibility* has become an increasingly central concept when organizations address employees' communication in strategy and employee policy documents. For example, one of the participating organizations in this study phrases it in the following way: "All employees, supervisors, and managers matter in the communication. Therefore, we all have a responsibility. [...] Employees have a decisive role in the communication of the organization, both internally and externally." (Stockholms stad, 2018). However, although employees' communication is framed as a responsibility in practice, responsibility has received almost no attention in strategic communication research – with the exception of Gulbrandsen and Just (2016a) short reflection that all organizational members have a communication responsibility.

Given the abundance of arguments for why the communication of employees is so important for organizations, and the insight that organizations increasingly acknowledge this and frame communication as a formal responsibility of employees, it is striking that no attempts have been made to explore communication responsibility and its potential antecedents to contribute knowledge about the communication responsibility of employees. Addressing this gap is important both from a theoretical and practical point of view. From a theoretical point of view, placing the limelight on the concept employee communication responsibility is important as it provides an approach to employees' communication that correspond with how it is approached and framed in practice. From a practical point of view, the study of employee communication responsibility and its potential antecedents is important as it contributes insights important for strategic communication management.

Thus, the main aim of this study is to increase knowledge about employee communication responsibility by introducing the concept employee communication responsibility and identifying and testing factors that influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. By doing this, the study will generate knowledge valuable for further theorization about employees' role as strategic communicators. Furthermore, the study provides valuable knowledge for practitioners, because it highlights factors that influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility and which are important to address in strategic communication management.

This article is structured in the following way. The next section introduces employee communication responsibility, followed by the literature review that generated the study's hypotheses. The review and hypotheses are followed by a presentation and discussion of the methods, and the method section is followed by the results from analyzing the empirical data. Finally, the results are discussed together with limitations and suggestions for future research.

### **Employee communication responsibility**

Employee communication responsibility is a concept introduced in this study. The communication responsibility of employees is a topic that has received considerable attention in strategic communication management in recent years. In strategy and policy documents, employees are increasingly exhorted to take responsibility for internal and external communication, and while several researchers have taken an interest in related dimensions such as employees communication role, behavior, and advocacy (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014), none have studied communication responsibility *per se*. Therefore, this study makes a first attempt to approach and explore communication responsibility to provide a point of departure and inspiration for future theoretical and empirical contributions on the topic.

Although the concept responsibility is frequently used in practice, it is necessary to ground the definition of employee communication responsibility in a more theoretical understanding of responsibility. From a philosophical perspective, saying that an agent has a (moral) responsibility for something is to say that it is reasonable to demand that the agent is made accountable for and can justify the thoughts, emotions, and behavior which follows as the agent attempts to take its responsibility (Smith, 2015). Thus, that organizations increasingly explicitly state that employees have formal responsibility for communication can be understood as a perspective shift from employees as passive recipients of communication to employees as active communicators accountable for how they communicate internally and externally.

However, according to (Smith, 2015), responsibility cannot solely be determined based on if an organization has made an agent accountable, as responsibility also requires that the agent itself understands and acts as if it has a responsibility. This highlights that responsibility has both an extrinsic and intrinsic dimension, meaning that it partly can be understood as a formal exhortation on employees by the organization (the extrinsic dimension), and partly as employees' own acknowledgement of this responsibility (the intrinsic dimension). This acknowledgement can be assumed to manifest in employees talk and acts as these are the only visible assessment criteria on which it is possible to judge if employees take responsibility. The intrinsic dimension is furthermore stressed by the notion that an agent has a responsibility, and is accountable, regardless of if there is an observer present to judge if the agent takes responsibility (Smith, 2015). This means that organizations, when exhorting employees to take communication responsibility, assume that employees internalize and "carries" a sense of responsibility for communication regardless of the presence/absence of managers and supervisors.

With this theoretical understanding of responsibility in mind, employee communication responsibility is in this study defined as an internalized sense of responsibility for communication that influence employees' observable communication behavior. It is thus perceived as a latent construct which is presumed to manifest in employees' communication behavior, as behavior, from a theoretical point of view, is the observable assessment criteria on which to assess if employees take responsibility. In this study, the communication behavior of employees is therefore perceived as an indicator of employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility.

While previous research has not studied employees' communication responsibility *per se*, there are several studies in fields related to strategic communication that study related concepts. Within public relations research, employees' communication behavior is conceptualized as megaphoning, scouting, and micro boundary spanning (Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011), which refer to "employees' voluntary efforts to collect and circulate information related to the organization externally and internally" (Kim & Rhee, 2011, p. 244). Within brand management, employees are ascribed of having an important responsibility as brand ambassadors (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001) that ideally "live the brand" (Ind, 2001). In their role as ambassadors for the organization, employees represent the brand, defend it, and listen to how stakeholders perceive the brand (Gelb & Rangarajan, 2014). Because "[s]trong, successful brands are realized through positive employee behavior" (King & Grace, 2009, p. 126), some researchers even suggest

that employees should be recruited based on how their personality relates to the brand personality (Sirianni, Bitner, Brown, & Mandel, 2013). Furthermore, leadership in organizations is increasingly seen as a mutual process constituted by both managers and employees (Simonsson, 2018), which further highlights that employees are perceived to have responsibility for internal communication processes as well.

However, while several studies have highlighted that employees' communication has consequences for organizations, no studies have paid attention to the communication responsibility of employees or potential factors influencing employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. As stated in the introduction, in addition to introducing the concept employee communication responsibility, this study aims to address this gap by also identifying and testing factors that influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. Exploring its potential antecedents, in addition to introducing the concept, is an important step in generating useful knowledge about communication responsibility. To achieve this, the following research question is posed:

**RQ:** Which factors influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility?

## Literature review

This section contains the literature review conducted to aid the formulation of hypotheses to test in the confirmatory phase through structural equation modeling. As the survey, from which this study draws its data, was created and conducted in an earlier phase of a larger project (see Method section), this review followed the data collection and was conducted simultaneously as the exploratory phase during which the exploratory factor analysis was conducted. Therefore, the selection of which antecedents to zoom in on to aid the formulation of hypotheses was driven both by the review, in which plausible relationships were reviewed, and the exploratory factor analysis, in which underlying dimensions in organizational aspects such as internal communication, leadership, and management were explored. The following sections contain the review and the proposed hypotheses.

### *Potential antecedents to employee communication responsibility*

As employee communication responsibility is a construct introduced in this study, the focus of the literature review was to review which factors previous research within strategic communication, public relations, and corporate communication has identified as antecedents to related constructs such as employee communication behavior, employee advocacy and brand ambassadorship.

Studies within strategic communication highlight the importance of internal communication activities to increase employees' awareness of how communication contributes to organizational goals and what their communicator role is. Internal communication is especially valuable for promoting active communication behaviors such as knowledge sharing, collaboration, and creativity (Mazzei, 2010). In another study, Mazzei (2014) found that aspects such as openness, feedback, listening, and participation were important ingredients for internal communication that stimulates employees to act as internal and external ambassadors. Mazzei, Dell'Oro, and Kim (2012) also identified internal communication as key for building a good relationship between the organization and its employees. In turn, a good organization–employee relationship improves the likelihood that employees enact positive communication behavior. Furthermore, both Heide and Simonsson (2011) and Zerfass and Franke (2013) suggest that communication practitioners should work with increasing employees' communication awareness and competence through internal coaching, education, and training.

Another dimension of internal communication is the communication climate. Communication climate has been defined as “a subjectively experienced quality of the internal environment of an organization [...] identifiable through reports of members’ perceptions of messages and message-related events occurring in the organization (Dennis, 1974, p. 29, as cited in Guzley, 1992). Dennis (as cited in Hill & Northouse, 1978) already in 1975 raised awareness of the importance of studying the relationship between communication climate and communication behavior to advance the understanding of “the practical significance of the communication climate construct” (p. 38). One practical significance of communication climate on employees’ communication is that it positively influences employee knowledge donating and knowledge sharing (van der Hooff & de Ridder, 2004). Another study found that organization and communication climate are positively correlated to employees’ organizational commitment (Guzley, 1992). In their study of antecedents to employees’ commitment to the organization, Welsch and LaVan (1981) found that there was a strong correlation between the communication dimension of organizational climate and employees’ commitment to the organization. Although the relationship between employees’ commitment and responsibility has not been studied, it is plausible that committed employees have a predisposition towards taking communication responsibility, and that the internal communication climate therefore also is positively related to employees’ predisposition towards taking communication responsibility.

Within public relations, studies of employee communication behavior have identified organization-employee relationship, symmetrical internal communication, perceived quality of relationships, and employee position as important factors for the communication behavior of employees (Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Lee, 2017). An early study of Holtzhausen (2002) identified workplace democracy as an important factor for employees’ communication behavior internally in the organization, thus pointing to the importance of not neglecting more intangible aspects of internal communication. Furthermore, studies of employee advocacy highlight leadership as an additional important factor besides symmetrical internal communication (Men, 2014).

Leadership is also suggested to be an important factor for employees’ tendency to act as brand ambassadors – where specific leadership behaviors such as initiating structure and being considerate are effective during different circumstances (Wallace, de Chernatony, & Buil, 2013). Furthermore, internal branding efforts are identified as important for aligning employees’ communication and behavior to the vision and values of the organization (Ind, 2017; Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, & Wilson, 2009). Previous research has specifically identified immediate supervisors as the preferred information source of employees (Larkin & Larkin, 1994). Immediate supervisors are important as their communication shapes the perceptions of employees (Holladay & Coombs, 1993). One study examining the relationship between the manager-employee relationship and employees’ communication behavior found out that the relationship influenced employees’ communication in work groups (Sias & Jablin, 1995).

Furthermore, employees’ perception of top management communication are strongly related to employees’ commitment (Allen, 1992). Trust in top management acts as a mediator between top management communication and employee commitment (Ashish, Bishop, & Dow, 2012). A recent study by Men (2015) shows that “[e]mployees who work for CEOs who are better communicators tend to trust the company more, are more empowered, committed to, and satisfied with the organization” (p. 469). While no previous studies have examined the relationship between top management-employee communication and employee communication responsibility, it is, as mentioned earlier, plausible to assume that committed employees also have a predisposition towards taking communication responsibility.

In conclusion, previous research on employees’ communication suggests internal communication and communication climate, leadership, and management-employee relationships as important factors for employees’ communication. On the basis of these insights, and insights from the exploratory factor analysis conducted in the exploratory phase of the study, the relationships between internal communication climate openness, immediate supervisor communication, top management-employee communication, and employee communication responsibility were assumed

to be relevant to test through structural equation modeling. The following hypotheses regarding the relationship between internal communication climate openness, immediate supervisor communication, and top management–employee communication were proposed:

**H1:** Employees who perceive the internal communication climate as open are more likely to take communication responsibility.

**H2:** Employees who have a positive attitude towards the immediate supervisor communication are more likely to take communication responsibility.

**H3:** Employees who have a positive attitude towards top management–employee communication are more likely to take communication responsibility.

Additionally, in a recent study, Falkheimer et al.'s (2017) showed that employees to a large degree perceive communication to be important for organizational and individual success. This highlights that the perceived importance of communication gradually increases among non-communication practitioners. Because previous research within strategic communication has suggested that awareness about how communication contributes to the organization is important to enable employees to become active communicators (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Zeffass & Franke, 2013), this study furthermore expect and hypothesize that employees perceived importance of communication influences their predisposition towards taking communication responsibility:

**H4:** Employees who perceive communication to be important for individual and organizational success are more likely to take communication responsibility.

Based on this review, this article proposes a model in which internal communication climate openness, immediate supervisor communication, top management–employee communication, and perceived importance of communication are positively related to employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility.

## Method

This study is both explorative and confirmatory as it both aims to provide a suggestion for how to understand and approach employee communication responsibility, and simultaneously aims to test the concept and its potential antecedents to provide a point of departure for future research as well as relevant insights for researchers and practitioners.

### *Survey construction and measures*

The first phase of the project consisted of a literature review and interviews with managers and communication practitioners. The aim with the review was to get a better understanding of previous research on communication aspects related to organizational performance and to identify which communication aspects to include in the survey. The research group then created the survey through revising scales developed in previous unpublished studies conducted by researchers in the research project Communicative Organizations, and through revising scales from staff surveys of the participating organizations. This first phase resulted in a survey with 137 questions distributed over 8 major themes: 1) Background questions, 2) Communication channels and internal communication, 3) Leaders, employees and communication, 4) Views about communication and communication practitioners, 5) Communication work, 6) The communication practitioner – professional role, 7) The communication practitioner and the future, and 8) The image of the organization – all covering communication aspects expected to have consequences for the organization. The survey used Likert-



type scales ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (fully agree). Internal communication was measured through 22 questions, immediate supervisor communication was measured through seven questions, top management was measured through four questions, the perceived importance of communication and communication practitioners was measured through eight questions, and lastly, role as employee was measured through six questions. After the exploratory factor analysis and the literature review presented in section 2 had been conducted, four factors hypothesized to influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility were selected for the confirmatory phase and structural equation modeling. The factors and individual items selected for the confirmatory phase are presented in [Table 1](#).

Furthermore, the survey was pretested on a limited sample population ( $n = 25$ ) which had similar characteristics to the target population. This pretesting identified some survey flaws such as phrasing, irrelevant questions, and survey length which were corrected before the final version was sent out to the targeted sample population.

### **Participants**

The data were collected via both online and paper surveys between October 2015 and September 2016 in eleven Swedish public and private organizations. While online surveys were used in all organizations, a small number of employees in one of the organizations lacked access to a computer and could not fill in an online version. Therefore, a paper version of the survey was distributed to this group. In total, 27,849 people received the survey, of which 8,091 chose to participate, resulting in a response rate of 29.1 percent in total. Of these 8,091, the 4,726 who checked in the box for employee, rather than manager or communication professional, were selected for further analysis in this study.

### **Analytical procedure**

The original sample of 4,726 employees was then divided into two separate subsamples. One organization was removed because the survey distributed there lacked a specific question relevant for this study. The first subsample contained six organizations and 2,244 cases and was subjected to exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The second subsample consisted of four organizations and 2,482 cases and was used for hypotheses and model testing using structural equation modeling (SEM). Even though this procedure resulted in two smaller samples it was considered important to combine both an exploratory and a confirmatory approach. The exploratory approach was deemed necessary due to the lack of scales measuring the factors relevant for this study, and the confirmatory approach was deemed important to increase knowledge of employees' communication responsibility. Both the EFA and the SEM will be presented in the result section. However, the confirmatory phase is the main focus in this article, and thus the discussion will only focus on the results of the confirmatory phase.

### **Exploratory phase – exploratory factor analysis**

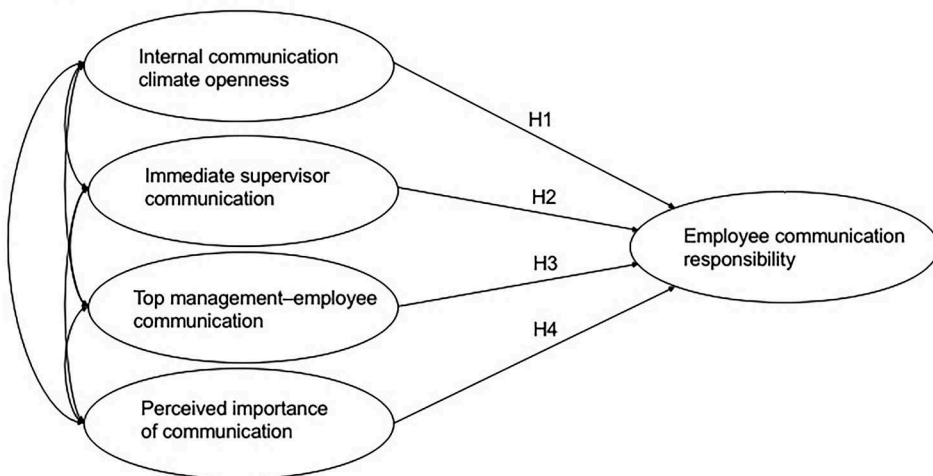
To facilitate the test of these assumptions on the data gathered in the Communicative Organizations project, the number of variables had to be reduced to simplify interpretation. To reduce the number of variables to simplify interpretation, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. Due to the need for data reduction, a principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted because it is used “when the objective is to summarize most of the original information (variance) in a minimum number of factors for prediction purposes” (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014). In total, 16 items about internal communication, 7 items about immediate supervisor communication, 6 items about role as employee, 4 items about top management, and 8 items about perceived importance of communication and communication practitioners were subjected to PCA followed by orthogonal rotation of factors using



Varimax in SPSS version 23. Before performing PCA, the suitability of the data was assessed. The correlation matrix revealed several coefficients of .3 and above. The KMO value ranged between .72 to .93, thus exceeding the recommended values of either .50 or .60 (Hair et al., 2014; Pallant, 2013). Bartlett's test of sphericity reached statistical significance, which furthermore supported the factorability of the data. While the factor analysis resulted in a total number of 8 factors, five of them were selected for the confirmatory phase – a selection based on the factors that previous research suggests influence employees' communication. These five factors, interpreted as internal communication climate openness, immediate supervisor communication, top-management communication, perceived importance of communication, and employee communication responsibility, and their items, are further presented in the result section (see Table 1).

### **Confirmatory phase – structural equation modeling**

To test the hypotheses (Figure 1), structural equation modeling using maximum likelihood estimation was conducted on the second sample of 2,482 cases. IBM SPSS AMOS version 24 was used for data analysis. SEM was preferred over multiple regression because SEM, in contrast to multiple regression, can perform multiple estimations of interrelated dependence relationships at the same time, takes measurement error into consideration, and provides modification and revision suggestions (Cheng, 2001). As the construct employee communication responsibility is made up of items inquiring about reported behavior assumed to be influenced by the underlying construct interpreted as responsibility, the factors were measured reflectively as this approach is suitable for underlying constructs of this type, and because the constructs fulfill most of the criteria for reflective models suggested by Jarvis, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff (2003). The model was tested as originally specified without any modifications to the original model. The Chi square ( $X^2$ ), Comparative fit index (CFI), and Root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) were used to determine goodness-of-fit as these are the most common fit-indices (Hair et al., 2014), and because they have been used in previous strategic communication and public relations studies using SEM (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011; le Roux, 2014).



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized model.

## Descriptive statistics

Initially, the assumptions of normality were assessed in both subsamples. Some items in the data were negatively skewed above  $-1.0$ . This indicates that the respondents generally are quite satisfied with internal communication climate openness, top management–employee communication, immediate supervisor communication, and perceive communication as important. This overall tendency towards negative skewness was considered normal even though it exceeded the general rule of thumb, and no further measures were taken to account for the skewness because “larger sample sizes reduce the detrimental effects of nonnormality” (Hair et al., 2014, p. 70) where Hair et. al. argues that sample sizes above 200 reduce the negative effects of nonnormality.

Next, missing data were analyzed. Top management–employee communication stood out in the normality analysis since all items contained missing data ranging from 14.5–28.1 percent which is above the recommended 10 percent level (Hair et al., 2014). When analyzing text answers in the survey, the researcher concluded that this tendency can be explained by the insufficient knowledge employees have about top management whereabouts. However, because this type of pattern of unknown missing data needs to be addressed (Hair et al., 2014), both pairwise and listwise deletion were performed on the top management–employee communication items in order to assess the measure of sampling adequacy and the factor loadings. As the difference in KMO and factor loadings were identical, the missing data for top management–employee communication was in the end handled using pairwise deletion in the exploratory phase to ensure that all produced factors were created through the same procedure. In the confirmatory phase, when performing the structural equation modeling, maximum likelihood was used because this method is considered superior to other methods for handling missing data (Allison, 2003).

## Results

Results from the exploratory factor analysis and the test of the proposed model through structural equation modeling are discussed next.

### Exploratory factor analysis

For internal communication, principal component analysis (PCA) revealed three factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1 and which explained 32%, 12%, and 7%. For immediate supervisor communication, the PCA revealed only one factor with an eigenvalue above one, explaining 73% of the variance. For top management, one factor with an eigenvalue above 1 was revealed, explaining 70% of the variance. For perception of communication and communication practitioners, two factors with eigenvalues above 1 were revealed, explaining 49% and 15% of the variance. Finally, for role as employee, the PCA revealed one factor with eigenvalues above 1 and which explained 43% of the variance.

Due to space restrictions, the factors presented in the table below (Table 1) are limited to those that were later selected for the confirmatory phase where the hypotheses acted as selection criteria. Since Varimax was used as rotation method, the factor loadings of the rotated component matrix are presented in Table 1.

This study introduces a factor for measuring employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. The construct includes three indicators referring to internal communication, and two indicators that refer to both internal and external communication. As such, the construct disregards the rather artificial division between internal and external communication (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016b), and presents a suggestion for how to approach employees responsibilities as regards communication which, due to the increasing demand for collaboration, interaction and participation in modern organizations, have become increasingly important to address (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016a). While all other factors have high alphas, the reliability test on the items measuring employee communication responsibility revealed that this set of items has an alpha below 0.7, which is often considered as cut-off point (Nunnally, 1978). It is however common to see published studies with

**Table 1.** Factor analysis.

Latent factors (Cronbach alpha)	Measurement items	Factor loadings
Internal communication climate openness ( $\alpha=.87$ )	When there are major changes I always receive relevant information.	.77
	It is possible to submit points of view to management and heads.	.60
	I always have access to information about current events in the organization.	.66
	I have a clear picture of the organization's general vision and objectives.	.64
	My workplace is characterized by participation.	.65
	Communication between different departments and/or units in the organization works well.	.68
	I can rely on the information which comes from the management.	.75
	There is a high ceiling in the organization, i.e., I can express my opinions freely.	.69
	I rely on the information that is on the intranet, in the newsletter and in other internal communication channels.	.60
Immediate supervisor communication ( $\alpha=.94$ )	My immediate supervisor is accessible.	.79
	My immediate supervisor is good at giving constructive feedback.	.90
	My immediate supervisor is open for feedback.	.87
	My immediate supervisor communicates clear objectives for our operations.	.84
	My immediate supervisor supports me in my daily work.	.89
	My immediate supervisor explains what the consequences are for my work of what happens in the organization.	.80
	My immediate supervisor invites for dialogue on important matters.	.87
Top management–employee communication ( $\alpha=.86$ )	The top management provides clear information to the employees.	.91
	The top management has good insight into what is happening in the organization.	.90
	I keep updated about the work of the top management through the internal channels.	.61
	I have considerable confidence in the top management.	.89
Perceived importance of communication ( $\alpha=.74$ )	Communication is an increasingly important success factor for organizations.	.79
	Communicative ability is an increasingly important competence in working life.	.77
	Without communication that works well we cannot achieve our operations objectives.	.59
Employee communication responsibility ( $\alpha=.64$ )	I contribute to initiating good dialogue in my work group.	.74
	I often give feedback to my colleagues at work.	.69
	I know what responsibilities I have as regards communication.	.67
	I often say good things about the organization.	.58
	I give negative opinions in my work group if necessary.	.56

Explorative factor analysis. Rotation method: Varimax.

lower alphas than 0.7 (DeVellis, 2011), and the 0.7 cut-off criterion has been contested (e.g., Schmitt, 1996). In exploratory studies, an alpha value of 0.6 can be justified (Hair et al., 2014). Therefore, due to the explorative nature of this study, the researcher decided to use the employee communication responsibility factor regardless of the decrease in statistical power the low alpha (0.64) implies because the factor has potential and can be developed. Future studies should however attempt to increase the reliability of this scale through introducing and testing alternative items.

### **Structural equation model analysis**

While the chi square test was significant ( $X^2 = 3423; .000$ ) the other fit indices indicated an acceptable model fit. The CFI (0.91) and RMSEA (0.06) indicated acceptable fit. Although it has become established knowledge that a model ideally should have a good fit with CFI above 0.95 and RMSEA below 0.05 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), these have become magic numbers separating bad models from good ones, which is not the case (Hair et al., 2014). Instead, et al. suggest a rule of thumb that models with

a sample size of more than 250 cases and with between 12 and 30 observed variables should strive for a CFI of 0.92 or more and an RMSEA of 0.08 or less. This study almost meets the CFI criterion (0.91) and does meet the RMSEA criterion (0.06). As this is partly an exploratory study, this Goodness-of-fit was deemed acceptable – although future studies should try to improve the model.

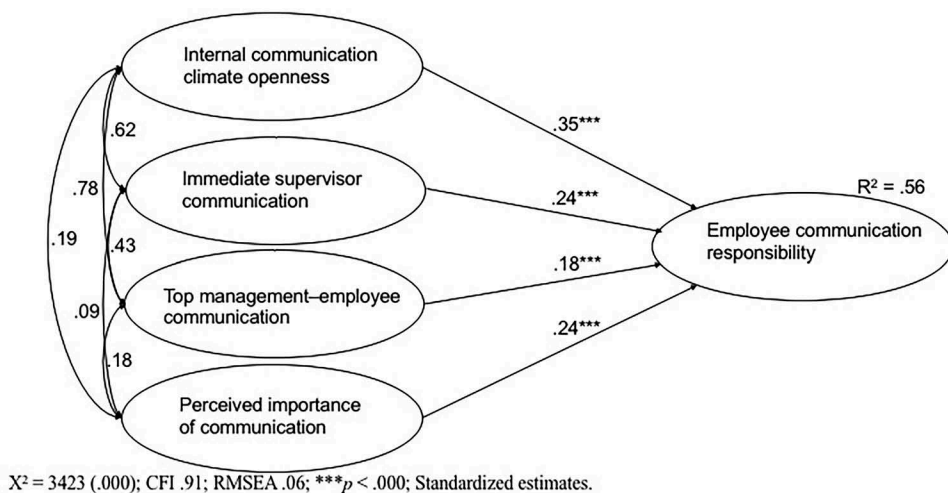
As [Figure 2](#) shows, there was strong collinearity between internal communication climate openness and top management–employee communication (0.78), as well as internal communication climate openness and immediate supervisor communication (0.62) which indicate that they could be collapsed into fewer constructs. To test this, the constructs were collapsed into two and one before running the SEM, but that procedure resulted in poorer model fit and lower variance explained. Furthermore, the reviewed literature strengthens the argument that there is a theoretical division between the constructs that were kept. Considering these aspects, the researcher decided to stick with the proposed number of constructs. The strong multicollinearity does however reduce the explanatory power of the unique contribution of the specific constructs, and this should be taken into consideration when interpreting the model.

### Hypotheses testing

H1 expected that a positive relationship exists between the perception of internal communication climate openness and employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. A positive relationship was found (.35,  $p < .000$ ), so the hypothesis was supported indicating that an open internal communication climate is a contributing factor for employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility.

H2 proposed a positive relationship between immediate supervisor communication and employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. This relationship was statistically significant (.24,  $p < .000$ ) indicating that the immediate supervisor communication influences employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility.

H3 proposed a positive relationship between top management–employee communication and employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. A positive relationship was found (.18,  $p < .000$ ) which indicates that the perception employees have of the top management–employee communication is a contributing factor for employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility.



**Figure 2.** The results of the SEM test.

H4 proposed a positive relationship between employees perceived importance of communication and employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. A positive relationship was found (.24,  $p < .000$ ), so the hypothesis was also supported.

## Discussion

Given the number of researchers arguing that researchers and practitioners must start taking employees' communication seriously, this study aimed to contribute to the knowledge development of employee communication by introducing the concept employee communication responsibility and studying which factors influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. The study tested four hypotheses suggesting that an internal communication climate openness, immediate supervisor communication, top management–employee communication, and perceived importance of communication all influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. The results show that all four factors all have significant influence on coworkers' communication responsibility. An open internal communication climate had the strongest effect followed by immediate supervisor communication, perceived importance of communication, and top management–employee communication.

The results show that employees who perceive the internal communication climate as open are more likely to have a predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. Firstly, the findings thus support suggestions by previous research about the relationship between internal communication and employees' communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Mazzei, 2010, 2014; Mazzei et al., 2012; Zerfass & Franke, 2013), and the relationship between internal communication climate and employees' communication (van der Hooff & de Ridder, 2004). Secondly, it also extends the discussion by showing that an open internal communication climate is positively related to employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. This highlights the importance especially for communication practitioners to consider interventions to improve the internal communication to indirectly influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility.

Furthermore, the results show that the immediate supervisor's communication is important for employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. Previous research has suggested that managers and supervisors are important for related concepts such as employees' communication behavior, advocacy, and ambassadorship (Men, 2014; Sias & Jablin, 1995; Wallace et al., 2013), and this study adds to that by showing that immediate supervisor's communication influence employees' predispositions towards taking communication responsibility.

Previous studies have shown that top management communication is an important factor for employee commitment (Allen, 1992), and that CEOs that are skilled communicators get more committed employees (Men, 2015), thus highlighting the importance of acknowledging the importance of communication between top management and employees. The results of this study further support this suggestion idea as the hypothesis that top management–employee communication contributes to employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility was supported, and it therefore strengthens the findings of previous research that stress the importance of well-functioning communication between top management and employees. The results suggest that communication practitioners should understand and develop strategies that further enhance top management's communication to enhance visibility and transparency to improve employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility.

Additionally, the results indicate a positive relationship between perceived importance of communication and employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. Previous research has identified that employees believe communication to be important for organizational and individual success (Falkheimer et al., 2017), and that increasing employees awareness of the contribution of communication for organizational success is important to encourage employees to become more aware and active communicators (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Zerfass & Franke, 2013). This study

extends these insights by showing that perceived importance of communication positively influences employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. This insight strengthens previous research through highlighting the importance of educating employees' in communication matters so they can take greater responsibility for communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Mazzei, 2014).

However, by showing that an open internal communication climate, immediate supervisor communication, and top management–employee communication also have significant influence on employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility, this study shows that educating employees is not enough if they are to take greater communication responsibility. Rather, increasing employees' predisposition towards taking responsibility is a complex issue where several factors contribute and which are important to consider in internal communication management. Apart from educating employees, the study highlights that it is also important that communication practitioners train and consider managers and supervisors, create strategies and ongoingly work for improving top management–employee communication and the internal communication climate to address the factors that influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. This places great demands on communication practitioners to analyze and identify which factors need to be addressed in their specific organization.

As the communication responsibility of employees is receiving increasing attention from researchers arguing that new media changes the prerequisites for organizations and increases the demand for organizational members to take responsibility for communication (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016a), and that all organizational members need to take responsibility for effective communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Mazzei, 2014; Zerfass & Franke, 2013), this study is a timely contribution providing knowledge about factors that influence employees predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. It adds to the growing body of research interested in the communication of employees and complements and confirms previous research arguing for the importance of considering internal communication enablement strategies for turning employees into strategic communicators (Mazzei, 2014), studying the communication behavior of employees offline and online (Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2016), and arguing for the importance of increasing employees awareness about communication and to educate and counsel them to improve their communication skills (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Zerfass & Franke, 2013). These studies have directed attention towards the importance of considering and including employees in the strategic communication management of organizations, and especially how interlinked internal and external communication are. While this study focus on internal factors, it is reasonable to consider that external factors such as new media (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016a) also contribute to employees predisposition towards taking communication responsibility as they increase employees understanding of the power of communication.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to research on employee communication by introducing the concept employee communication responsibility and identifying four factors influencing employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. It shows that employee communication is a complex issue, and that communication practitioners need to take several organizational factors into account in the strategic management of organizational communication to improve employees' own sense of responsibility. By contributing empirically grounded research, the study furthermore answers the numerous requests from strategic communication researchers calling for more research into employees' communication, and by doing that it hopefully contributes to inspire future studies and contributions of knowledge on the matter. The major strength of the study is the large sample size of 4,726 employees divided into two separate subsamples of 2,244 cases in the exploratory phase and 2,482 in the confirmatory phase. While larger sample sizes often reduce the model fit in SEM analysis, this is



compensated by the increases of statistical power, representativeness, and generalizability of the results (Hair et al., 2014).

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, the factor for measuring employee communication responsibility (0.64) has a reliability below the 0.7 which is usually regarded as a cut-off point for exploratory research, although scales with lower Cronbach alphas than 0.7 are quite common in journals (DeVellis, 2011), and an alpha value as low as 0.6 can be justified in exploratory studies (Hair et al., 2014). Second, the high correlation between some of the exogenous factors in the model reduce the explanatory power of the exogenous factors' individual effect on the endogenous factor. Third, this study takes place in a Swedish context with Swedish organizations which further limits the generalizability of the results. Fourth, the study is limited to studying internal factors influencing employees' predisposition towards taking responsibility for communication.

### **Future studies**

This study reveals several avenues for future research. Firstly, the introduction of communication responsibility provides a point of departure for future studies on an increasingly central concept in strategic communication management. Secondly, by identifying four factors that influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility, it invites researchers to study how organizations and communication practitioners can manage these factors, and through that influence employees' sense of responsibility for communication. Furthermore, future studies should try to improve the factor of employee communication responsibility. At the moment this is promising, although not sufficient due to the low Cronbach alpha (0.64). Another important step to improve the validity of the model is to test it on different samples and in different cultural and geographical contexts. Additionally, future studies should strive to improve the model. While it has an acceptable fit ( $CFI = 0.91$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ), further improvements to the model could create an even better tool for predicting employees' attitudes towards taking communication responsibility. Future studies should also try to identify and test other factors that might contribute to employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility, such as education and years working in their organization as well as external factors that potentially contribute. Lastly, more qualitative approaches could also contribute to a more profound understanding of communication responsibility.

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