Gatekeeping Theory: Assessing the Validity and Reliability of the Measures of Communication Management in the Context of Universities in Uganda

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Abstract

The study assessed the psychometric properties of communication management using responses from staff of public universities in Uganda. Guided by the Gatekeeping Theory by Lewin (1947), the study examined the psychometric properties of management of communication flow, climate, structure, and message characteristics. To measure the respondents' opinions on the measures of organisational communication, a survey design was adopted for the study's investigations. The sample comprised 231 participants who were university officers, administrative officers, deans of schools and faculties, and academic heads of departments from selected public universities. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Descriptive results revealed that the level of management of communication flow, climate, structure, and message characteristics was high. PLS-SEM analysis indicated that, except for message characteristics, management of communication flow, climate, and structure constituted appropriate measures of organisational communication. This first context-specific validation in Ugandan public universities refines the Gatekeeping Theory by supporting a three-dimensional structure excluding message characteristics and provides a robust foundation for future

scale development in African higher education. It was concluded that scholars can satisfactorily use these measures in the study of communication management. For effective communication, universities should institutionalise clear communication flow, foster an open climate, and reinforce communication structures.

Keywords*: Communication; Climate; Flow; Message characteristics; Structure.*

Introduction

Communication management is an essential element in university settings because it determines how information is shared between different units, which include academic, administrative, and support structures. This impacts the coordination of activities, staff involvement, and organisational effectiveness (Ukpong, 2022; Turyahikayo et al., 2024). Nonetheless, in the context of universities, the Gatekeeping Theory provides a framework for understanding how communication management takes place, influenced by gatekeepers, that is, leaders or decision-makers who are charged with filtering and controlling communication. Gatekeeping processes determine the extent to which communication is open, accurate, and supportive, affecting employees' access to information and their ability to participate meaningfully in organisational life (Ophilia & Hidayat, 2021). As universities increasingly rely on effective communication to sustain collaboration, manage change, and strengthen institutional functioning (Galli, 2022; Khaw et al., 2022), understanding communication management through gatekeeping becomes essential.

Since the 1970s, few measurement scales related to organisational communication management have been developed. Early tools, such as Roberts and O'Reilly (1974), mixed behavioural patterns, attitudes, and communication preferences, creating conceptual ambiguity and limiting construct clarity. Viggiano (1990) measured principals' effectiveness in communicating about instructional matters in high schools in the USA. The strengths of the tool included its focused conceptualisation of instructional communication and the practical applicability of its items to core functions of school leadership. However, because communication

was considered a unidimensional concept, it did not capture multiple aspects of communication management. Furthermore, the instrument focused solely on instructional communication. These contextual and conceptual gaps limit the study's relevance in university settings, where communication occurs through multiple channels and across hierarchical levels, and in different functional units.

In the recent past, more measures of organisational communication have been developed, including Bakar and Mustaffa (2013), De Nobile (2020), Gupta and Sengar (2020), and Mandiwana and Barker (2022). However, these measures reveal several gaps, such as low factor loadings that weaken convergent and discriminant validity, conceptual overlap with interpersonal, managerial, and behavioural constructs, and a lack of context specificity for African universities. Given the low loadings and conceptual gaps, it can be inferred that most earlier tools were adopted without rigorous psychometric assessment. Together, these gaps highlighted the need for validated, context-appropriate measures in Ugandan higher-education institutions. This current instrument was developed based on the tool by Bakar and Mustaffa (2013) because of its more transparent structure and measures clearly describing communication management. However, the constructs whose indicators were not on communication management, namely, group bond, mutual respect, and communication openness, were dropped. Thus, the measures assessed were communication flow, climate, structure, and message characteristics.

Literature Review

Theoretical review

The Gatekeeping Theory of Organisational Communication, originated by Lewin (1947) and developed by White (1950), Shoemaker and Vos (2009), and Barzilai-Nahon (2009), informed the development of this tool. Gatekeeping refers to the process of filtering, refining, and organising the vast amounts of information within organisations so that only selected messages reach employees and stakeholders. Gatekeepers, typically organisational leaders or decision-makers in strategic positions, play a

central role in determining which information is disseminated, how it is framed, and the timing of its release (Schwalbe et al., 2015; Shoemaker & Vos, 2014; Wallace, 2018; Potnis & Tahamtan, 2021). In hierarchical institutions such as universities, where information flows through multiple channels and levels, gatekeepers ensure that only relevant and strategically important information is communicated, thereby influencing organisational effectiveness and staff engagement.

The Gatekeeping Theory is a coherent framework whose psychometric properties clearly describe communication management in universities. The theory directly informs the selection of constructs, namely, communication flow, communication structure, communication climate, and message characteristics. Communication flow reflects how information is transmitted across channels as controlled by gatekeepers. The communication structure captures the formal and informal networks that determine who manages and disseminates information. Communication climate represents the relational environment created by gatekeepers that affects openness, trust, and message acceptance. Message characteristics pertain to the quality and clarity of information after filtering. Together, these dimensions represent the key processes through which gatekeepers shape organisational communication, providing a theoretical basis for evaluating the psychometric properties of communication management in universities (Bakar & Mustaffa, 2013).

The elements of the Gatekeeping Theory offer a rationale for evaluating the psychometric structure of communication management within universities, as they reveal the state in which information control takes place within hierarchical organisational contexts. Nonetheless, the Gatekeeping Theory is not without limitations. The theory overemphasises controlling communication without leaving room for distributed, networked, or technology-driven communication, which is reflected in the current settings of organisations (Wallace, 2018). Nevertheless, in hierarchical university contexts where administrators and department heads act as central conduits of information, the Gatekeeping Theory remains highly relevant. It provides a coherent framework for understanding how leaders manage communication in public universities in Uganda and justifies the focus on communication

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flow, structure, climate, and message characteristics as key measurable dimensions.

Communication flow measurement

Communication flow refers to the pathway through which information travels within an organisation, enabling effective exchange and collaboration. This flow can be categorised into vertical and horizontal communication (Ophilia & Hidayat, 2021). Vertical communication encompasses both downward and upward flow of information, where information is exchanged between different organisational levels. In contrast, horizontal communication takes place among individuals at the same level or position within the organisation. In university hierarchies, according to the Gatekeeping Theory, gatekeepers determine the vertical and horizontal flow of information. A seamless communication flow is vital for organisations to convey messages effectively, ultimately enhancing member performance and overall organisational efficiency (Juddi et al., 2021). The indicators of communication flow assessed by Baker and Mustaffa (2013) were: I receive information about progress on tasks, company policies and goals, performance assessments, departmental policies, job requirements, external factors affecting the organisation, organisational updates, compensation, financial standing, and organisational outcomes. These indicators reflect the core informational needs within higher education institutions. These clusters are essential in public universities because they provide clarity on roles, accountability expectations, resource conditions, and institutional direction, all of which are central to managing complex bureaucratic operations. These measures were validated to fit the context of public universities and to determine how the flow of communication was rated.

Communication climate measurement

Communication climate refers to the atmosphere that shapes how information is shared and understood in an organisation (Lantara, 2019). In the context of the Gatekeeping Theory, climate is directly shaped by gatekeeping behaviour, specifically the tone leaders use, the openness with which they share information, and the feedback channels they permit or restrict. These behaviours determine whether communication feels supportive or defensive and whether staff perceive the organisation

as trustworthy. A favourable communication climate influences the quality of the work environment, enhances organisational effectiveness, and fosters organisational commitment (Berberoglu, 2018). Conversely, a toxic communication climate can result in misunderstandings, low morale, and disengaged employees (Bahrain et al., 2023). Good communication is critical in bureaucratic public universities, where hierarchical authority structures can easily limit upward communication and reduce perceived openness. As such, measuring climate offers insight into whether gatekeeping practices enable or constrain healthy communication. The indicators of communication climate studied by Baker and Mustaffa (2013) were: managerial recognition of communication's role; the ability of communication to motivate employees to meet goals; the extent to which feedback is prized; the company's communication atmosphere; the authenticity of communication; how instructions are delivered; whether communication reduces misunderstandings; and the extent to which supervisors prioritise understanding workers for effective communication. These indicators show relational conditions that influence how communication is interpreted within bureaucratic academic environments. However, given contextual differences, not all indicators may hold empirically, so the study examined those aspects of climate staff perceived as most meaningful in this setting.

Communication structure measurement

An organisation's communication structure refers to the networks that facilitate information exchange, which can be either centralised or decentralised (Guo et al., 2023). Within the Gatekeeping Theory, the centralised structure represents the organisational arrangements through which gatekeeping is exercised, namely formal reporting lines upward or downward. In contrast, decentralised communication networks allow all individuals to connect, promoting a more egalitarian exchange of information (Guo et al., 2023). The indicators of communication structure investigated by Baker and Mustaffa (2013) were: formal communication is active, accurate, and reliable; horizontal communication flows freely and precisely; communication volume is suitable; management is aware of and understands employee issues; organisational communication promotes staff identification and commitment; supervisors are receptive to ideas; informal communication is effective; supervisors are engaged

listeners; communication adapts to emergencies; and meetings are well-planned. These indicators are relevant to Ugandan public universities where bureaucratic governance systems rely heavily on formal reporting lines and, at the same time, informal networks such as personal interactions, collegial relationships, and unofficial channels play a crucial role. Understanding how these formal and informal structures shape information flow is, therefore, essential for evaluating communication management in such highly layered institutions.

Message characteristics measurement

Message characteristics denote various attributes of communication, including clarity, relevance, uniqueness, objectivity, trustworthiness, authenticity, and consistency (Kwon et al., 2021). These characteristics play a vital role in determining the effectiveness of persuasive communication (Rickard, 2021). According to Shen and Bigsby (2013), message characteristics can be broadly categorised into three types: content, structure, and style, which collectively contribute to the overall impact of a message (Salamondra, 2021). Within the Gatekeeping Theory, these characteristics reflect the outcome of leaders filtering and framing decisions, showing what information is selected, how it is shaped, and which contextual cues are emphasised. However, message characteristics overlap conceptually with flow, structure, and climate, since structure determines who filters messages, flow shapes the channels, and climate affects reception. Nonetheless, the message characteristics still remain distinct as the tangible qualities of the information employees receive. In universities, bureaucratic layers make high-quality messages essential for reducing misinterpretation and ensuring coordination. The indicators of communication characteristics studied by Baker and Mustaffa (2013) were: level of grapevine communication; success in overcoming information gaps; organisational information availability; efficiency of information sharing; time allocated to information provision; degree of distortion in upward information flow; accuracy and reliability of information; information accessibility; and language clarity in communication. These indicators capture both formal and informal channels, with grapevine reflecting informal networks that fill gaps left by delayed or filtered formal communication. These indicators were empirically tested to

determine their relevance and validity in the current Ugandan public university context.

Methodology

Research design and sample

The research employed a survey design, gathering data from a sample population through structured questionnaires. This strategy involves using a tailored instrument to capture the opinions and characteristics of a larger group, leveraging statistical analysis. The main goal was to efficiently collect descriptive information about a sizable population (Lau, 2016). The study population included university officers, administrative officers, deans of schools and faculties, and academic heads of departments (HODs). The study participants were from universities selected in each region of the country, that is, Kyambogo (central), Busitema (eastern), Gulu (northern) and Mbarara University of Science and Technology (western), for a sample representative of managers and academic heads in the public universities in the country.

The breakdown of the population was as follows: Kyambogo University had 88 participants (10 university officers, eight administrative officers, 12 deans, and 58 HODs); Busitema University had 65 participants (13 university officers, eight administrative officers, six deans, and 38 HODs); Gulu University had 69 participants (13 university officers, eight administrative officers, seven deans, and 41 HODs); and Mbarara University of Science and Technology had 64 participants (14 university officers, eight administrative officers, six deans, and 36 HODs). The total target population across the four universities was 286 participants. The researchers employed census sampling to study each staff category at each university, as the number of individuals in each category was small, with the largest group consisting of 58 people. Census sampling ensured full coverage and representativeness, and maximised the reliability of findings by reducing sampling error. However, usable data was obtained from 231 respondents. This was because some participants could not be reached. This resulted in a response rate of 81%, which is considered

adequate for generalisability, in line with the suggestion by Mellahi and Harris (2016) that a 50% response rate is sufficient to draw meaningful conclusions.

Instrument

The researchers utilised a self-administered questionnaire (SAQ) to gather data from university staff, comprising two sections: A and B. Section A captured respondents' demographic information. At the same time, Section B focused on organisational communication metrics, with indicators adapted from Baker and Mustaffa's (2013) study. To overcome data bias, data bias control was implemented by ensuring that the use of words with multiple meanings, technical jargon and infrequently used words was avoided. In addition, there was an alteration of anchors in the questionnaire. To ensure that the selected indicators were appropriate, they were systematically reviewed for clarity and relevance to the study objectives. In wording the indicators, revisions were made to enhance clarity and remove ambiguity. We evaluated each indicator for contextual suitability within Ugandan universities, ensuring that the terminology, examples, and phrasing fitted within local institutional practices. A five-point Likert scale, with 1 for 'Strongly Disagree' and 5 for 'Strongly Agree', was used to measure the indicators. Research ethics, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and protection of respondents' personal information, was ensured. Data was stored on password-protected devices and was accessible only to the research team to ensure confidentiality.

Data management

Data management involved processing the data and its analysis. Processing of the data was undertaken to clean, organise, and prepare the dataset by addressing missing values, outliers, and inconsistencies, thereby ensuring that the information used for measurement validation was accurate and reliable. Data analysis was conducted to evaluate the measurement and structural relationships among constructs statistically, enabling the assessment of reliability, validity, and the overall empirical adequacy of the developed instrument.

Data processing

The data underwent systematic processing prior to analysis to ensure accuracy and suitability for modelling. This involved coding participants' responses and entering them into SPSS, followed by generating frequency distributions to summarise the dataset and conducting screening procedures to identify missing values and potential outliers. Outliers resulting from data entry errors were removed and replaced with appropriate values, and box plot analysis did not reveal any outliers. All questionnaires were retained because none exceeded the 5% threshold for missing data (Hair et al., 2021a). Little's Missing Completely At Random (MCAR) test confirmed that the missing data was missing completely at random, allowing the application of series mean imputation. This method substitutes missing entries with the variable's mean as an acceptable estimate under MCAR conditions (Austin et al., 2021). This ensured that the data was fit for analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved calculating descriptive statistics to assess participants' perceptions of university communication. SmartPLS was utilised to develop measurement models and evaluate the psychometric properties of construct indicators. These models included validity and reliability assessments. Convergent validity was established through Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while discriminant validity was evaluated using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), with CR used to accommodate indicator heterogeneity. Multicollinearity was examined using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), which, like HTMT, assesses variable independence. Finally, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed to develop a model that highlights key indicators for each component. PLS-SEM was employed in developing the instrument because it is particularly suitable for complex models and formative measurement structures (Hair et al., 2021b). Moreover, PLS-SEM enables simultaneous assessment of the measurement model, examining indicator reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity and the structural model, making it ideal for validating new scales with multiple latent constructs (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Its flexibility in handling small to moderate sample sizes and

accommodating both reflective and formative constructs further justified its use in developing a comprehensive organisational communication management instrument (Henseler, 2023). Therefore, an appropriate measure was developed.

Results

Demographic characteristics

The demographic characteristics covered were the gender of participants, age groups, the highest academic qualification and working experience in the current university. The results follow in Table 1.

Table 1: *Demographic characteristics of administrative and academic heads*

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Per cent
Gender	Male	152	65.0
	Female	82	35.0
	Total	234	100.0
Age groups	Up to 30	6	2.6
	30 but below 40	45	19.2
	40 and above	183	78.2
	Total	234	100.0
Highest academic qualification	Bachelor's degree	18	7.7
	Master's degree	101	43.2
	PhD	115	49.1
	Total	234	100.0
Working experience	Less than one year	30	12.8
	1 but less than 5 years	41	17.5
	5 but less than 10 years	63	26.9
	More than 10 years	100	42.7
	Total	**234**	**100.0**

The demographic results revealed that male administrative and academic heads (65.0%) outnumbered their female counterparts (35.0%). However,

both genders were well-represented, with a significant number of female participants. The majority of respondents (78.2%) were 40 years or older, ensuring representation across age groups. In terms of qualifications, 49.1% held PhDs, 43.2% had master's degrees, and 7.7% had bachelor's degrees, making the findings generalisable across various academic levels. Furthermore, 42.7% of participants had served 10 years or more, indicating extensive experience. The study's diverse representation across positions, ages, qualifications, and experience makes the results applicable to various academic and administrative leaders in universities. The dominance of staff with higher age, qualifications, and experience strengthened the credibility of the results because they provided responses on organisational communication management from an informed point of view.

Instrument development

The development of the measurement instrument followed a systematic, multi-step process to ensure its validity, reliability, and suitability for structural modelling. Before running Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), subject-matter experts reviewed the items for content validity to ensure conceptual alignment and appropriateness of the measurement indicators. First, EFA was conducted to identify and retain items that effectively measured the intended constructs. Indicators with factor loadings below 0.50, low loadings, or significant cross-loadings were removed, thereby enhancing the construct validity of the instrument instrument's construct validity (Jordan & Spiess, 2019). Subsequently, CFA was employed to establish the measurement model, with construct validity further assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) to confirm discriminant validity. Reliability analyses, including Cronbach's alpha (α) and composite reliability, were conducted, with a minimum threshold of 0.70 (Hair Jr. et al., 2021b). Following validation of the measurement model, a structural model was developed to provide a visual representation of the measures of organisational communication constructs. This involved specifying paths between latent variables representing key dimensions of organisational communication, namely communication flow, climate, structure, and message characteristics, to assess the strength and significance of

their interrelationships. The model was tested for collinearity using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) to ensure that the constructs were independent and the structural paths were unbiased. This rigorous, stepwise approach ensured that the developed instrument and structural model were both valid and reliable, providing a robust foundation for analysing the dynamics of organisational communication.

Table 2: *Exploratory Factor Analysis*

Indicators		CC	CL	CS	MC
CC1	Communication given by top management of the University to staff motivates and stimulates an enthusiasm for meeting its goals	0.755			
CC2	The university's leadership maintains a constructive approach to communication	0.829			
CC3	Feedback from staff members is appreciated and considered important by the administration.	0.772			
CC4	Communication from the university's management to employees is genuine and transparent	0.780			
CC5	Effective communication by the administration helps in minimizing misunderstandings and disputes with staff	0.644			
CL1	There is good information flow among university departments		0.789		
CL2	Information about university policies and goals is communicated		0.837		
CL3	Information about my performance is given		0.698		

CL4	Information about government action affecting the university is communicated		0.754		
CL5	Information about accomplishments and/or failures of the university is communicated		0.715		
CS1	University management respects communication rights of its staff			0.780	
CS2	University management knows and understands the problems faced by its staff			0.801	
CS3	Management of the university listens and pays attention to communication from staff			0.841	
CS4	In this university, management meetings are well organised			0.530	
MC1	Informal communication, such as gossip or the grapevine, is acknowledged by management as a significant channel of information within the university				0.271
MC2	The administration is concerned about maintaining open and unrestricted communication				0.337
MC3	The time it takes for information to be disseminated to staff is a key concern for university management				0.534
MC4	The university has put in place channels to ensure that staff members receive relevant information				0.861

The Exploratory Factor Analysis (Table 2) confirmed a clear four-component structure consisting of Communication Climate (CC), Communication Flow (CL), Communication Structure (CS), and Communication (MC). The results showed that three of the four components measured were

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valid, namely, Communication Climate, which demonstrated strong loadings across all five items (0.644, 0.829), indicating solid convergent validity, and Communication Flow, which also showed consistently high loadings (0.698, 0.837), confirming that the items effectively capture the construct. Communication Structure was similarly supported, with loadings ranging from 0.530 to 0.841; although CS4 loaded somewhat lower than the other items, it remained within acceptable thresholds and did not compromise the overall component. In contrast, the Communication (MC/COM) component showed weaknesses, with two items (MC1 and MC2) loading very poorly (0.271 and 0.337), suggesting misalignment with the factor. Only MC4 demonstrated a strong loading (0.861), while MC3 had a moderate loading (0.534). Taken together, the analysis supports the validity of the four-component structure, with three components showing strong measurement properties and one (MC) requiring item refinement or revision to ensure construct coherence.

Measurement models

The measurement models (Tables 3 and 4) present descriptive statistics (means) and validity assessments for the constructs: Communication Climate (CC), Communication Flow (CL), Communication (COM), and Communication Structure (CS). Convergent validity was evaluated through Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values, while discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR).

Table 3*: AVE and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations*

Measures	Means	AVE	COM	CC	CS	CL
COM	3.93					
CC	3.87	0.790	0.891			
CS	3.98	0.560	0.880	0.657		
CL	3.95	0.578	0.867	0.746	0.660	

The mean scores (Table 3) show that management of communication, that is, communication climate (mean = 3.87), communication structure (mean = 3.98) and communication flow (mean = 3.95), was high. Overall,

communication management (mean = 3.93) was high. The high mean scores, approximating four on the 5-point Likert scale, signified strong agreement among respondents. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded the 0.5 threshold, confirming convergent validity. Moreover, the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios were below 0.90, indicating discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2021a). This suggests that the organisational communication constructs were precisely measured, with each construct capturing distinct aspects of the phenomenon. The AVE values demonstrated that the items converged on their respective constructs, while the HTMT ratios confirmed the independence of these constructs. However, the constructs of message characteristics did not meet the discriminant validity conditions, as the ratio correlations exceeded 0.90. Therefore, the construct of message characteristics was dropped.

Table 4: *Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha for the study constructs*

Measures	α	CR	VIF
Communication Climate	0.734	0.883	1.615
Communication Structure	0.723	0.832	1.435
Communication Flow	0.816	0.872	1.676

Table 4 shows that Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values exceeded the 0.70 threshold, confirming the reliability of the constructs. This indicates that the indicators within each construct were highly correlated, resulting in reliable data. In essence, the measures demonstrated internal consistency, supporting the dependability of the research findings (Purwanto & Sudargini, 2021). The collinearity (VIF) test indicated no high correlation (collinearity), as all values were below 5, the maximum (Tomaschek et al., 2018). Therefore, the constructs used to measure the Gatekeeping Theory of Organisational Communication demonstrated distinctiveness, thereby providing independent assessments.

Organisational communication structural model

Structural equation modelling was employed to examine the organisational communication construct. Figure 1 shows the appropriate indicators of the constructs measuring the variable.
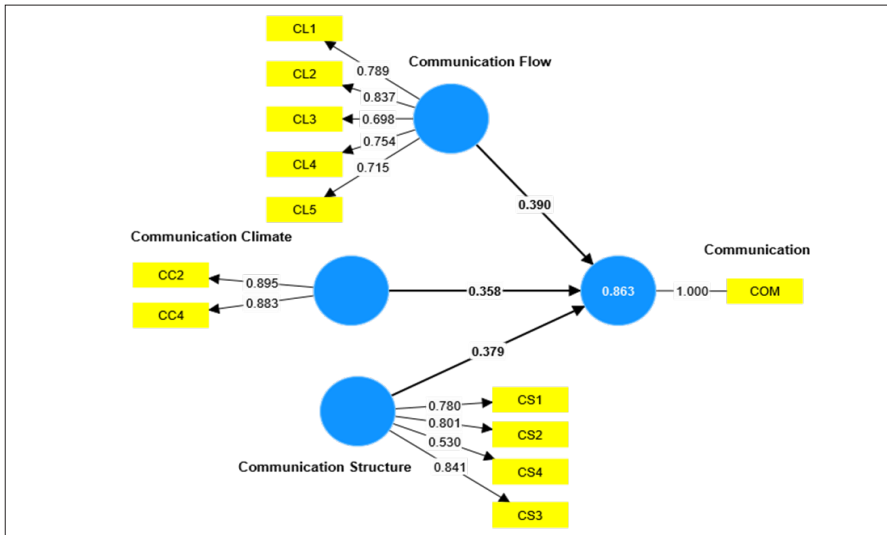

Figure 1: **Organisational communication structural model**

Figure 1 indicates that organisational communication management is a tri-dimensional concept comprising communication flow, communication structure, and communication climate. In the final measurement model, communication flow retained five indicators (CF1, CF5), each meeting the minimum retention criterion of factor loadings above 0.50, as recommended by Hair Jr. et al. (2021). The specific loadings were: CF1 = 0.789, CF2 = 0.837, CF3 = 0.698, CF4 = 0.754, and CF5 = 0.715. Communication structure retained four items, all of which also satisfied the 0.50 threshold, with loadings of CS1 = 0.780, CS2 = 0.801, CS3 = 0.530, and CS4 = 0.841. Communication climate was measured by two indicators, both of which demonstrated strong factor loadings (CC2 = 0.895 and CC4 = 0.883) and were therefore retained. Conversely, message characteristics (MC) was excluded from the final model because none of its indicators achieved adequate discriminant validity, indicating that the construct

did not stand as a distinct dimension of organisational communication. Item retention was guided by the rule that only indicators with factor loadings ≥ 0.50 were retained in the model. This systematic refinement strengthened the psychometric robustness of the measurement model. It confirmed that organisational communication in Ugandan universities is best represented by the three constructs: communication flow (5 items), communication structure (4 items), and communication climate (2 items).

Discussion

The analysis above indicates that the measures, namely communication flow, communication structure, and communication climate, were validated as constructs of organisational communication management, which reinforces the Gatekeeping Theory, which posits that information in organisations is filtered and shaped by individuals in strategic positions (Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In the context of Ugandan universities, gatekeeping functions are particularly pronounced, as leaders determine which information flows, how it is transmitted, and the environment in which it is interpreted. Communication flow aligns with gatekeeping mechanisms by demonstrating how leaders regulate the direction and timing of information movement; communication structure reflects the organisational channels through which gatekeepers exercise control; and communication climate captures the relational influence gatekeepers exert when shaping message interpretation and acceptance. Communication flow emerged as a key dimension because of the reliance on formal channels to transmit policies, performance feedback, and government directives, consistent with Bakar and Mustaffa's (2013) argument that organisational communication is institutionally patterned.

The communication structure reflected formalised authority lines, organised meetings, and procedural communication mechanisms, aligning with the literature on structured filtering in bureaucracies (Schwalbe et al., 2015; Guo et al., 2023). The contextual perspectives of Ugandan public universities reinforce the validity of the communication structure. This is because the structural rigidity in the form of hierarchical administrative layers, formal communication protocols,

and centralised decision-making, informs how information is filtered and disseminated. Formal communication channels, including circulars, memos and planned meetings, intensify gatekeeping functions, while an administrative culture emphasising compliance and authority strengthens leaders' control over message flow and interpretation. Communication structure is particularly influential in this context because it dictates the formal routes through which information must go, much of the time requiring approval from top management. Of course, this establishes predictable but tightly controlled communication pathways that reinforce gatekeeping power. These organisational tendencies help explain why structure emerged as a valid construct.

Regarding communication climate, although it was indicated to be measured by fewer indicators, the leadership of universities maintained a constructive approach to communication, and provided a climate that appreciated feedback from staff members, which influences message acceptance and organisational trust (Berberoglu, 2018; Lantara, 2019). This construct is supported by the contextual realities of Ugandan public universities, where the communication climate shapes how staff perceive and respond to filtered information. In settings characterised by limited openness or cautious communication norms, staff often rely heavily on official messages without questioning or seeking clarification, thereby amplifying the influence of gatekeepers. These organisational features help explain why communication climate emerges as a valid construct.

Message characteristics, by contrast, failed to achieve discriminant validity. Several items had factor loadings as low as ≥ 0.337, indicating that staff did not perceive message attributes such as clarity, timeliness, or openness as independent dimensions of communication. Instead, these qualities were understood as embedded within broader flow and climate processes, a finding consistent with that by Shoemaker and Vos (2014), who view message characteristics as outputs of gatekeeping rather than standalone constructs. The collapse of this construct also clarifies issues observed by Bakar and Mustaffa (2013), who reported low factor loadings (≥ 0.30), low reliability ($\alpha = 0.67$), and conceptual overlap with other communication dimensions. In Ugandan universities, message-related

concerns appear to reflect underlying structural or climate deficiencies rather than a distinct evaluative category.

The three validated constructs provide insight into persistent communication patterns in bureaucratic higher education environments. The strong loadings of communication flow, structure, and climate demonstrate that university communication is highly structured, institutionally regulated, and relationally influenced. These results underscore the importance of hierarchical processes, formal authority, and supportive climates in shaping organisational information practices. The study, therefore, refines existing theoretical models by showing that, within this context, only flow, structure, and climate consistently capture the core dynamics of organisational communication management. In contrast, message characteristics are better understood as embedded outcomes of these primary dimensions.

Implications of the Study

This study implies that organisational communication management in Ugandan universities is in terms of communication flow, structure, and climate. This highlights the centrality of gatekeeping functions in shaping how information is filtered and transmitted within institutions. The removal of message characteristics as an independent construct indicates that qualities such as timeliness and openness are better understood as part of broader communication processes rather than standalone issues, suggesting that efforts to improve organisational communication should focus on enhancing information flow, structures, and climate-related factors. These findings demonstrate the importance of formal authority lines and structured communication mechanisms in fostering effective information flow. Therefore, organisational communication improvements should target implementing the validated dimensions. Still, the study, through establishing a refined three-dimensional model, strengthens the Gatekeeping Theory within university contexts by empirically demonstrating how flow, structure, and climate collectively operationalise gatekeeping processes, providing a clearer framework for understanding information control in hierarchical institutions.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study makes a significant contribution by identifying the indicators of the different constructs that can be used when studying the management of organisational communication. However, several limitations emerged. First, the construct of message characteristics was dropped because it failed to attain discriminant validity. However, future research should be carried out on the same in a variety of organisations, including private universities, to assess the accuracy of the indicators of the construct. Further, for the construct of communication climate, only two indicators were retained, contrary to Petrescu (2013), who reported that two indicators per factor may not be ideal, as SEM models often require three or more indicators per construct to ensure adequate identification and minimise potential biases. Therefore, future research involving a variety of organisations, including private universities, should seek to establish if more indicators validly measure the construct. Furthermore, the study relied on respondents from only four public universities, which may limit the generalisability of the findings; future studies should consider a broader range of university types to enhance the applicability of the results.

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