

Capability gap in relation to public relations' strategic issues in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

This study explores an area that has not been widely researched in the Latin American and Caribbean region: the identification of a capability gap in relation to key strategic public relations and communication management issues and activities. To this end, this article presents findings and analysis from a survey conducted in 20 Latin American and Caribbean countries in 2020. The existence of a capability gap in relation to key issues and activities in public relations and communication management is confirmed, which represents a challenge for the development of the public relations field as well as for higher education institutions across the region.

1. Introduction

The public relations field has shown an interest in exploring professional roles and competencies for several decades now. This is evidenced by pioneering studies such as Broom and Smith (1979) and Broom and Dozier (1986), both focused on consultancy in the United States, as well as Gregory (2008), which outlined 10 key competencies in the British public and private sectors.

Despite those initiatives, the field “has scarcely addressed a complex framework of competencies” (Moreno et al., 2017, p. 112) and it is only in the last decade that it has begun to receive special and growing consideration in both academia and professional associations.

In this regard, the two-year European Communication Professional Skills and Innovation Programme (ECOPSI) combined data from the European Communication Monitor (ECM), a longitudinal study in over 40 countries, with focus groups and interviews with professionals from seven European countries (Tench et al., 2013). Its main contribution was the proposal of the COMPAS (Counselling, Organising/Executing, Managing, Performing/creating, Analysing/Interpreting, and Supporting/Guiding) competence model in an attempt “to develop an understanding of the competencies held by senior communications practitioners and the contributing knowledge, skills and personal attributes that are relevant to their role and that of future managers in a similar role” (Tench et al., 2013, p. 7).

More recently, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and

Communication Management (a worldwide confederation of professional associations in public relations and communication management) commissioned two research initiatives related to competencies: the Global Body of Knowledge (GBOK) and the Global Capability Framework (GCF), respectively. Both research initiatives linked themselves to the somewhat novel concept of capabilities within the public relations field. Between 2014 and 2016, the GBOK project analysed 31 academic sources and competency frameworks in various countries, and produced a list describing different KSABs (knowledge, skills, attributes, behaviours). The KSABs were arranged within the list according to levels of professional experience, ranging from entry-level to seniority (Manley & Valin, 2017). Between 2016 and 2018, the GCF developed a framework identifying the core capabilities of communication professionals on a global scale, with the intention to be adapted to different cultures, different functions and different levels. The framework introduced 11 professional, communication and organisational capabilities and 37 sub-capabilities supporting them (Fawkes et al., 2018; Gregory & Fawkes, 2019). Adopting the same methodology as the global project (i. e. GCF), three national capability frameworks have been applied so far in Latin America, focusing on the countries of Argentina, Ecuador and Colombia.

These Latin American research initiatives are especially valuable because, as Jain et al. (2014) and Thelen (2021) specify, within a global academic field characterised by its strong Anglo-Saxon bias (Xifra, 2003; Jelen-Sanchez, 2018), Latin America is a region lagging behind in terms

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of public relations research. Therefore, large-scale longitudinal studies - such as the biennial Latin American Communication Monitor (hereafter, LCM), which serves as the main source for this article - provide a substantive base for regional research. [Moreno et al. \(2023\)](#) affirms that the LCM emerged to contribute to the disciplinary and professional development of public relations in Latin America. The LCM served to develop systematised and longitudinal scientific knowledge, as well as to evaluate the trends and changes that occurred within the countries being examined. According to the authors, "since 2014, it has become the largest study of the profession in the region, increasing its participation and relevance as a source in international scientific forums in Latin America every year" ([Moreno et al., 2023](#), p. 2). Moreover, [Thelen \(2021, p. 2\)](#) testifies to the broad scope of the LCM as the "most representative study of the perceptions that communication professionals have in the region".

In recent years, Latin America has been receiving growing attention from the academic and professional communities of the Global North (e.g. [Thelen, 2021](#); [Labarca & Sadi, 2022](#); [Moreno et al., 2023](#)). This indicates a trend of engendering inclusiveness on a global scale, further exemplified by the pre-conference on Latin America, jointly organised by the Organizational Communication and Public Relations divisions, at the 2023 ICA (International Communication Association) Annual Conference in Toronto.

It is worth noting that Latin America is considered in this paper as a subcontinent comprising 19 sovereign states, as well as several territories and dependencies, where Spanish and Portuguese serve as the principal languages. It occupies an area of approximately 19,197,000 sq km (7412,000 sq miles) that, including the Caribbean, stretches from the northern border of Mexico all the way to Argentina and Chile at the southern-most tip of the South American continent. The United Nations estimates the population of Latin America and the Caribbean to be 671 million as of June 2023, equivalent to 8.42 % of the total world population.

This paper addresses the evidence provided by the Latin American Communication Monitor (LCM) in its 2020/2021 edition ([Álvarez-Nobell et al., 2021](#)), based on working professionals' perceptions of the new competencies and capabilities required in public relations and communication management. These competencies and capabilities are to be compared to the foremost strategic issues and activities identified by practitioners within three years, following the model of the [Macnamara et al. \(2018\)](#) 2017–2018 Asia Pacific Communication Monitor-based study and, to some extent, the [Moreno et al. \(2017\)](#) ECOPSI-based study. In doing so, this study seeks to investigate a largely unexplored topic and identify whether there is a competencies and capabilities gap in the key strategic issues and activities of public relations and communication management in Latin America.

2. Literature review

According to [Gregory and Fawkes \(2019\)](#), differentiating the concepts of competencies and capabilities is not an easy task. The main approaches to KSABs come from the management field, with confusing terminology, and a tendency to be instrumental, i.e. oriented towards prioritising the needs of the organisation. Approaches in the field of public relations reflected to some extent these terminological confusions, as evidenced by the fact that the concept of capability was only fully adopted in the recent GCF project.

In this context, it would be appropriate to explore [Sen, \(1993, 1999\)](#) approach to capabilities and human development, especially as the notion of capability has gained prominence in several disciplines. It has broadened the competence perspective ([Gutiérrez-García & Sadi, 2020](#)) by offering a view focused on the future potential of professionals. From this approach, competencies would be micro-level descriptions of the constituent elements of the profession, while capabilities would present a more holistic view, covering the profession in broad terms without

specifically indicating what would be needed to perform well in it. In a rapidly changing world, this capability approach would be helpful "not only to carry out current tasks and functions but also to meet the challenges of the future" ([Macnamara et al., 2018](#), p. 705).

The above-mentioned concepts of competencies and capabilities are characterised in the following section.

2.1. Competencies

Management approaches often examine the topic of *competence* from a perspective of resource-based theory, suggesting that "knowledge, information, capabilities, characteristics and organisational procedures are resources. Those resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate and non-substitutable contribute to gain and maintain a competitive advantage" ([Gregory & Fawkes, 2019](#), p. 2). The authors highlight that the term *competencies* is also applied at the individual level and that a number of frameworks have been developed to address it. These competency frameworks have tended to be presented as task descriptions to determine professional expertise or as references to a body of knowledge to assist knowledge creation and curriculum design in higher education institutions. Often organised by level of seniority for job descriptions or by level of qualification for educational purposes, they also include measurable and observable behaviours. This helps define the person and their desired contribution to the organisation, or, in other words, "sets of behaviours that support the attainment of organizational objectives. How knowledge and skills are used in performance" ([Gregory, 2008](#), p. 216).

Moreover, according to [Macnamara et al. \(2018\)](#), in the human resources literature, the concepts of competency and competence have different origins and denote different approaches. Competency refers to:

An individual's capacity to perform particular tasks or a role competently. Because it is particularized, competency is usually determined internally within an organization and has been a major focus of HR and performance management in organizations over many decades and in HR research ([Stevens, 2013](#)). Competency involves a meso-level bottom-up approach that describes what individuals must do to fulfill their roles ([Macnamara et al., 2018](#), p. 706).

So while *competency* is an internal focus on the performance of specific tasks and functions in a particular organisation, *competence* is most often described and defined externally, as by a professional body, for example. It refers to the standards required for a function in a sector or across an occupation or profession ([Macnamara et al., 2018](#)). The previously mentioned GBOK and ECOPSI projects have operated using this latter perspective.

2.2. Capabilities

The notion of *capability* has gained prominence in various disciplines by offering a perspective that focuses on the future potential of professionals. This allows it to both differentiate itself from and broaden the perspective of competence. The capabilities approach draws heavily from research on international development and sustainability by [Sen \(1993, 1999\)](#) and [Nussbaum \(2000\)](#), and from work on human resource management by [Lester \(2014\)](#).

This perspective focuses on the well-being and creative potential of human beings, making it novel and qualitatively different from previous competence-based approaches. It encourages the field of public relations to focus on what practitioners could achieve if all constraints within their practice were removed, thus emphasising the essential role of 'context' and its influence upon practitioners. [Lester \(2014\)](#) asserts that by placing people in the centre of the equation, understandings of capability and the notion of competence are further broadened. This emphasises the practitioner's opportunities to achieve their competences. The author stresses the importance of context, including consideration of the constraints for success (e.g. access to resources, training or technology), which are not always considered in a

competency analysis.

From this perspective, capabilities are broad elements that refer to the scope and role of professionals. They are supported by competencies, which are based on more detailed descriptions about what individuals should be able to do. They include the knowledge, skills and attributes those professionals should have.

The GCF project worked with this approach and produced a globally applicable capability framework (as seen in Table 1) in 2018. The project was realised through a partnership of leading academics working with national professional associations in nine countries on every inhabited continent. This collaborative format promoted a global benchmarking of capabilities while also reflecting the cultural and regional variations of public relations as a profession. The intention was to ensure a common understanding of the profession’s scope, as well as to help raise standards globally. National frameworks were produced for each of the nine countries involved in the original research; these were then disaggregated and reformulated to produce an agreed Global Capability Framework, which the Global Alliance officially adopted in 2018 at its biennial World Public Relations Forum in Oslo.

Informed and framed by this literature review, the study addresses working professionals’ perceptions of the capabilities required in public relations and communication management in Latin America. These perceptions are based on evidence provided by the 2020/2021 edition of the Latin American Communication Monitor (LCM). In this paper, the following three research questions are explored:

RQ1. What communication activities and strategic issues do public relations practitioners consider to be most important in 2020 and by 2023?

RQ2. Which communication channels and instruments are most important for practitioners to address stakeholders in 2020 and by 2023?

RQ3. What level of capabilities do practitioners say they have in relation to the strategic issues that are considered most important by 2023?

It should be noted that the original reference to the term competencies will hereafter be retained where they have been used, although the concept of capabilities is preferred by this article. This is done, as previously mentioned, by conceptually agreeing with Macnamara et al. (2018) that the term “constitute[s] a meta-level because they holistically incorporate and integrate KSAs (i.e., competencies), competency and competence”. In short, “capabilities are made up of competencies, competency and competence, plus various enablers to go beyond existing knowledge and experience” (p. 706). This article stresses that capabilities are to be understood as broad, holistic statements that

Table 1
Global Capability Framework (Fawkes et al., 2018; Gregory & Fawkes, 2019).

Communication	Organisational	Professional
To align communication strategies with organisational purpose and values	To facilitate relationships and build trust with internal and external stakeholders and communities	To provide valued counsel and be a trusted advisor
To identify and address communication problems proactively	To build and enhance organisational reputation	To offer organisational leadership
To conduct formative and evaluative research to underpin communication strategies and tactics	To provide contextual intelligence	To work within an ethical framework on behalf of the organisation, in line with professional and societal expectations
To communicate effectively across a full range of platforms and technologies		To develop self and others, including continuing professional learning

describe the scope and role of professionals, and that these capabilities are supported by competencies.

3. Methodology

The analysis presented in this article is based on empirical data from the Latin American Communication Monitor (LCM), the largest survey of public relations and communication professionals in Latin America and the Caribbean. LCM is conducted biennially and in conjunction with the European Communication Monitor, the Asia-Pacific Communication Monitor and the North American Communication Monitor. The study uses a set of common questions from the Global Communication Monitor (GCM) series and adds a number of additional regionally relevant questions in each edition.

This 2020/21 study explores four constructs. First, developments and dynamics in the public relations field are identified through longitudinal comparisons of strategic issues, communication channels, and ethical challenges. Second, regional and national differences are revealed by breaking down the results into 12 countries representing the top key markets. Third, a selection of current challenges in the field are empirically tested: *cybersecurity*, *communication ethics* and the *role of women in communications*. With the massive expansion of remote work as a legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic, *cybersecurity* has skyrocketed in importance, even blossoming into a field of its own. *Communication ethics* focuses on identifying the frequency of ethical challenges and how to face them, as well as ethical aspects of digital communication practices in particular. Lastly, the glass ceiling regarding the *role of women in communications* is of special interest when analysing what prevents them from developing professional capabilities and reaching high positions. Fourth, statistical methods are used to identify excellent communication departments in the sample and later define which aspects make a difference.

3.1. The instrument

The online questionnaire used in the 2020/21 LCM edition included 47 questions organised into eight sections, two of which are the focus of this analysis, as explained above. The design of the instrument was based on research questions and hypotheses explored in previous editions of this study and of the European Communication Monitor, as well as other issues highlighted in recent field literature. The instrument used dichotomous, nominal and ordinal response scales, particularly five-point Likert scales ranging from “very high” to “very low” and “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The survey was conducted in Spanish and Portuguese, and was tested by 18 communication professionals in five Latin American countries, who were allowed to make amendments prior to its operationalisation.

3.2. The sample

Most of the respondents (68.5 %) were from South America (Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela), followed by Central America and the Caribbean (22.6 %: Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Dominican Republic) and North America (22.6 %: Mexico and Puerto Rico).

The demographics reveal the quality of the sample as well, which is large and heterogeneous in terms of experience and positions although with a slight prevalence of mid- and senior-level professionals; the mean age was 38.7 years. The sample is also consistent with the feminisation observed in the last decades in the field, given that 67.2 % were women. In terms of levels of seniority and positions, 26.7 % headed departments or were CEOs of agencies, 34.1 % were team or unit managers and 39.2 % were team members. As for work experience, 54.9 % had more than 10 years and 21.1 % between six and 10 years.

Like in previous editions, the relevance of higher education to professional practice is clear: 97.4 % of those surveyed had an academic

degree (50 % an undergraduate’s degree, 43.1 % a master’s degree and 4.4 % a doctoral degree).

3.3. Data collection

More than 20,000 professionals in Latin America were invited, largely based on the databases of the professional associations and research partners representing 26 Latin American and Caribbean countries. Also invited were participants from previous editions of the study (three editions so far) who had requested to continue participating. All were reached through personal emails and dissemination through the LCM website and social networks, as well as those of their research partners.

1850 participants completed the survey and 1683 were identified as valid cases; responses from people who could not be clearly identified as part of the target population were removed from the data set altogether. These 1683 professionals, based in 20 different countries, worked in companies, governmental and non-profit organisations, agencies, or even independently. Data was gathered between May and July of 2020, in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4. Data analysis

For data analysis, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used. The results were tested to determine their statistical significance, depending on the variable. They were classified as significant ($p \leq 0.05$) or highly significant ($p \leq 0.01$) through Pearson’s chi-square

tests (χ^2), ANOVA/Scheffe post-hoc tests, Kendall rank correlation, or Mann Whitney’s Test-U.

4. Results

4.1. Key strategic issues for communication management

As seen in Fig. 1, the survey found three paramount strategic issues of communication and PR management projected for 2023. First, "coping with the digital evolution and the social web" (39.4 %), which the last three editions of the LCM have included as the most important issue. Second, "using big data and/or algorithms for communication" (36.8 %) and third, exploring "new ways of creating and distributing content" (34.9 %). In contrast, the least relevant topics were identified as "ending gender issues at different levels" (16.2 %) and "raising and adapting professional communication competencies" (17.4 %), the latter being of particular significance to this study.

When analysed by type of organisation (Fig. 1), some notable differences could be identified. Agencies and consultancies chose "digital evolution and the social web" first (41.6 %), followed by "content management" (38.3 %). In contrast, listed companies were more concerned with the "use of big data and/or algorithms applied to communication". The public sector had the most interest (26.6 %) in "managing the demand for more transparency and more active publics", whilst the third sector gave greater importance than the rest to "dealing with the speed and volume of information flow" (39.6 %). Independent consultants were more concerned with "strengthening the role of the

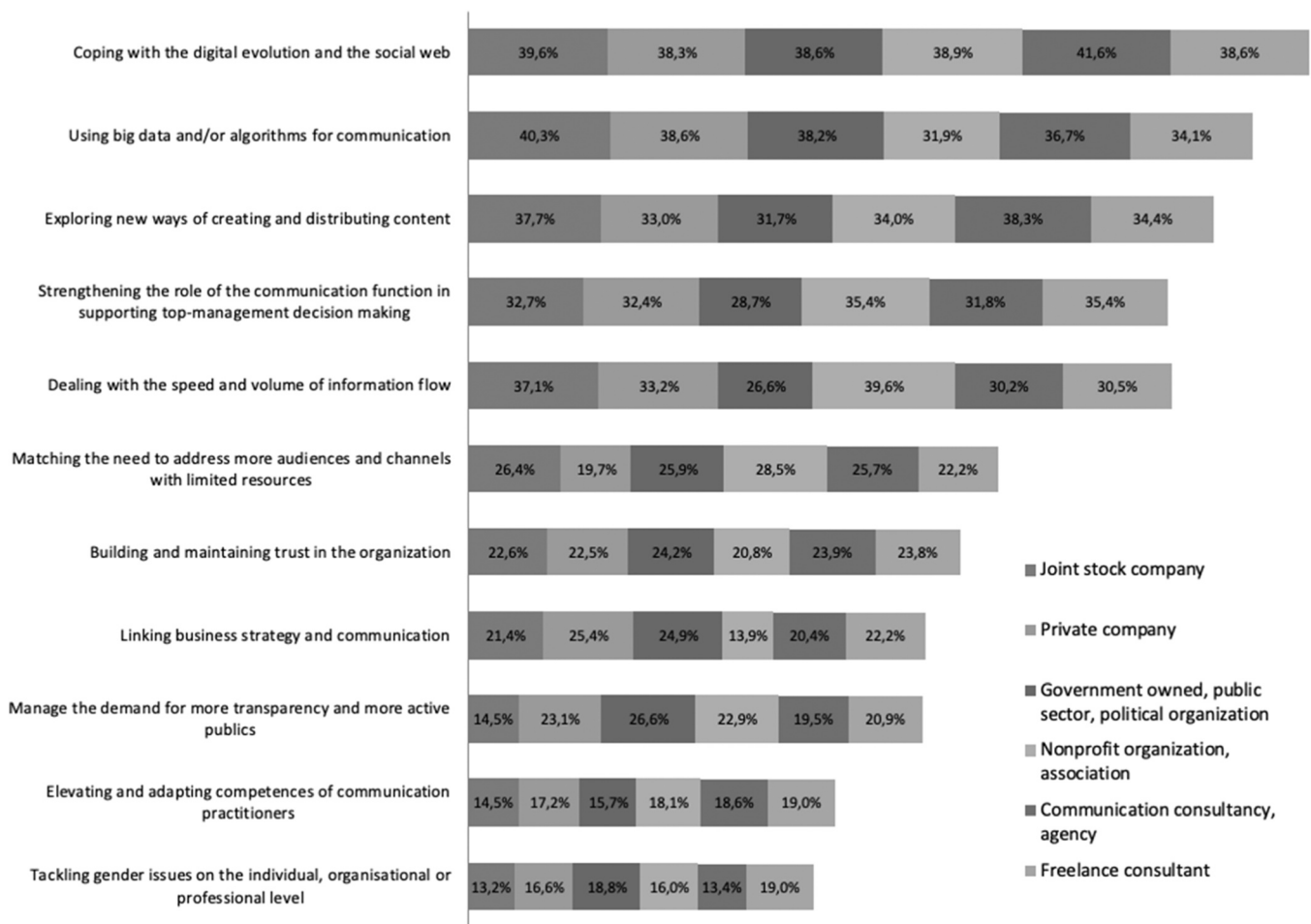


Fig. 1. : Key strategic issues for communication management up to 2023. n = 1683 communication professionals from 20 countries. Q12: Which issues will be most important for communication/public relations management in the next three years from your point of view? Choose exactly 3 items. Percentages: frequency based on the selection of the top 3 as issues. Share by type of organisation.

communication function to support senior management decision-making" (35.4 %).

4.2. Communication channels and instruments

Regarding the importance of communication channels and instruments in 2020 and 2023, Latin American practitioners believed that mobile communication was advancing rapidly and was going to continue to do so by 2023. Social media, deemed the most important channel, was projected to decrease very slightly in importance by 2023. As for traditional media relations, participants believed them to be in recession, with TV and radio suffering the largest drop-off (19.5 %), followed by print media (12.9 % less important) (see Fig. 2).

Taking into account the survey's timing (the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic), the lower ratings for "face-to-face" communication (down 5.7 %) and "events" (down 6.8 %) can be deemed quite symptomatic. Interestingly, one channel that appeared to be growing in the future was "non-verbal communication".

4.3. Development of competencies in the public relations profession

Concerning the development of competencies in the field, four out of five professionals in Latin America placed importance on the need for constant improvement. However, only 24.3 % believed the debate to be present in their own country.

Communication development needs were assessed similarly across all positions analysed, with no significant differences between leaders and followers. However, discussion on the development of competencies differed significantly from country to country; it could be observed that in Panama there was a great deal of discussion, with Chile, Venezuela, Ecuador and El Salvador showing the least. Brazil (91.3 %) and El Salvador (87.9 %) showed more demand for competency development (see Fig. 3).

When asked about key competencies for the Latin American communication field, the surveyed professionals revealed large differences between perceived importance and personal qualification level, especially in business, technology and data competencies. The latter was the lowest with 56 % of development, and a significant difference

between perceived importance and personal level, even though with 78 % it was the least valued element (see Fig. 4).

As aligned with specific studies on consulting firms (e.g. Zerfass et al., 2022), professionals working in agencies claimed to have the highest general competencies compared to the rest. On the other hand, those who managed online communication demonstrated a clear need to catch up with business competencies. Technology competencies were on average the lowest rated among them.

5. Discussion

Three of the five most important strategic themes for public relations and communication management arising from this study came from digital communication. The same logic was applied when assigning importance to communication channels and instruments.

Indeed, "coping with the digital evolution and the social web", "using big data and/or algorithms for communication" and "dealing with the speed and volume of information flow" were within the most relevant issues. Communicators largely seemed to believe that mobile devices were advancing rapidly in the professional field and would continue to do so. Contrasting this evidence with the fact that almost one out of every two Latin American professionals lacked technological and data capabilities, it would be appropriate to state that the capability gap could be labeled as compelling.

In relation to RQ1 (what communication activities and strategic issues do public relations practitioners consider to be the most important in 2020 and by 2023), it is possible to recognise, both presently and in the short-term, a tension between the functions linked to technological/data challenges and other functions more related to strategic/managerial roles. This can be clearly demonstrated when cross-referencing the prospection of strategic issues and the regional development level of existing professional skills. The tension also positions the public relations profession differently, and consequently requires other capabilities to be developed as a matter of priority.

Regarding RQ2 (which communication channels and instruments for practitioners to address stakeholders are the most important in 2020 and by 2023), evidence suggests that the technical dimension in Latin America takes precedence over the strategic dimension. Within the list

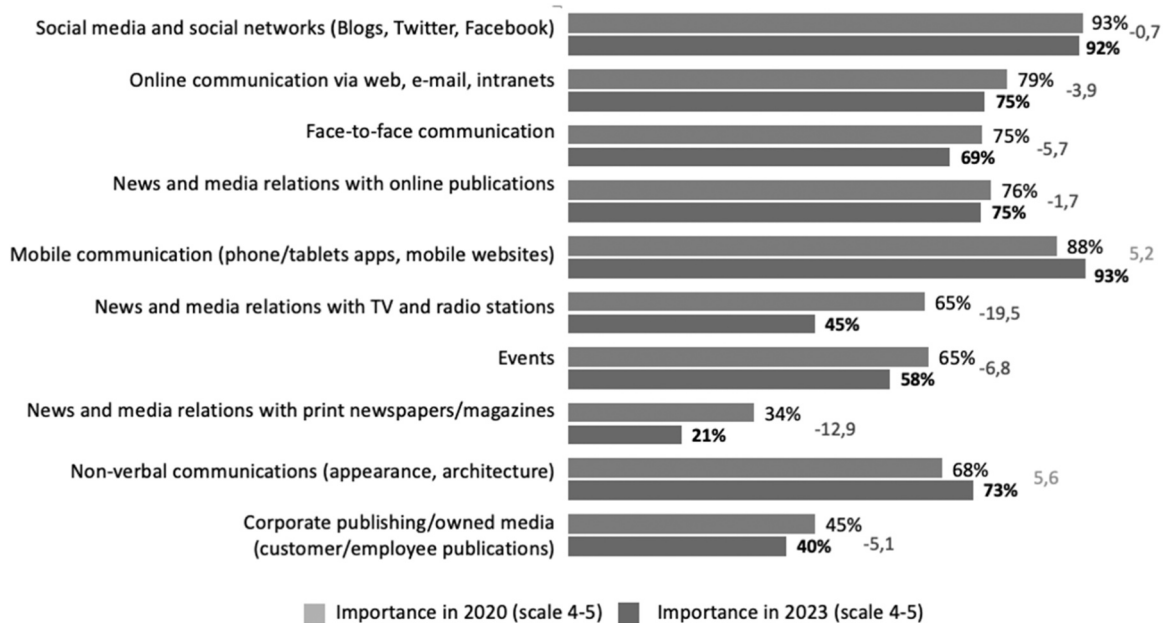


Fig. 2. : Importance of communication channels and instruments in 2020 and 2023. n = 1683 communication professionals from 20 countries. Q16: How important are the following methods of addressing stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences today? In your opinion, how important will they be in three years' time? Scale 1 (Very low) - 5 (Very high). Percentages: Frequencies based on scale points 4-5.

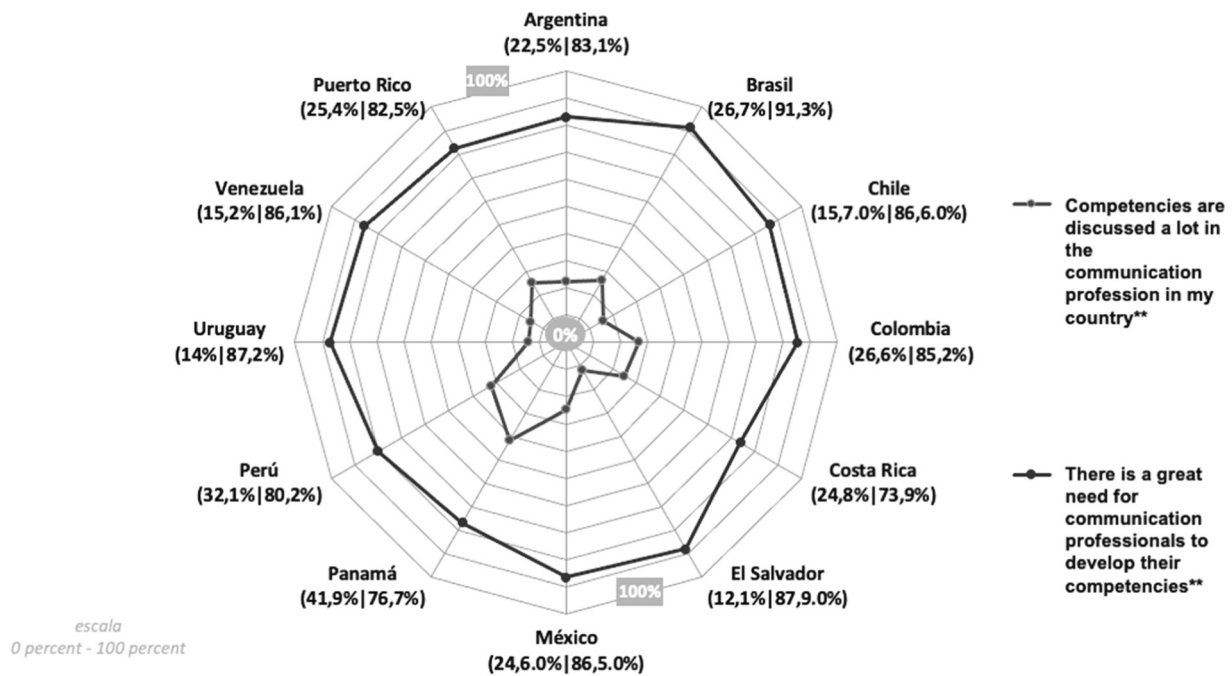


Fig. 3. : Comparative country assessment of the current state of play in competency development. n = 1683 communication professionals from 12 countries. Q13: Professionals need a broad set of skills and knowledge to fulfill their tasks. How do you assess the current situation regarding competencies in communication? First scale, 1 (Competences are not discussed at all in the communication profession in my country) - 5 (Competences are discussed a lot in the communication profession in my country); second scale, 1 (There is no need for communication professionals to develop their competences) - 5 (There is a great need for communication professionals to develop their competences). Percentages: Frequencies based on scale points 4-5.

of strategic issues, "connecting the organisation's strategy with communication" is in eighth position. This could have repercussions for the communication function's impact when deploying plans, actions and means, leaving it to achieve *outputs* rather than *outcomes*.

As for RQ3 (what level of capabilities do practitioners say they have in relation to the strategic issues that are considered to be the most important by 2023), the three most important strategic issues in the profession are linked to technology and data issues. This makes the large differences between perceived importance and level of personal qualification in capabilities linked to technology and data very revealing.

In development is the need to deal with the velocity and multiplicity of data, the development of information systems for the proactive management of agendas and the challenges surrounding automation, the use of big data, and even artificial intelligence. However, as stated, data capability is the least valued and, simultaneously, the least developed in this study.

Similarly, the difference that can be seen in business capabilities at the regional level, albeit to a lesser degree, is noteworthy. This deficiency, as Cisternas Osorio et al. (2022) points out, could lead to communication actions and proposals being decontextualised. Unrelated to corporate and business objectives, this creates further challenges for a variety of stakeholders, namely researchers, educators, practitioners and professional bodies in the field of public relations.

As for academia in Latin America, given the central role that universities play in the training required for the job market, an important consideration would be whether the discussion has been effectively taking place at the educational level, or if it ever will. Aggravating the situation would be the existence of under- and post-graduate public relations courses that do not engage in any activities or formative instances that immerse students in monetary, economic or financial issues (Cisternas Osorio et al., 2022).

The ensuing discussion would undoubtedly be geared towards the aptness of academia's capability training. Examples for content enhancement would be a deeper focus on statistics, computer science and programming, business, finance, artificial intelligence and

cybersecurity, among others.

Such changes should naturally be addressed by the higher education industry, a sector that is uniquely positioned to pioneer change in the region. Given universities' almost exclusive dependence on student fees, they should have vested interest in catching up with market demands, as evidenced by Sadi and Ferrari (2022) in the Argentinian case. This should be one of the major issues to be resolved in terms of future curricular adaptations.

However, in such scenarios, a symptomatic tension is identifiable, due to curricular changes happening much slower than growing demands in the field, even during an era of accelerated changes. Furthermore, the challenges in training and/or recruiting trained teaching professionals who are equipped to deal with these emergent trends would make this panorama even more complex to achieve.

A similar concept is applicable to professional bodies in the Latin American region. A commitment to organising and promoting stronger training programmes would foster the development of their members' existing capabilities. To a similar extent, a more serious investment in training employers would yield similarly positive results.

This leads to a necessary reflection on the implications for formal undergraduate, postgraduate and executive education, internal and external organisational training, as well as continuing professional development paths. From an organisational point of view, the relationship between the team's capability level and their dedication to the training, in various types of organisations and across all groups in Latin America, should be promoted as a key element to be taken into account.

Although with variations depending on the type of organisation, the overall results of this study demonstrate professionals' awareness of the need to develop new capabilities in the field of public relations. This demographic believes improvement to be a necessity and that this need for new capabilities remains a debated issue in the region. This clashes with the assumption that, due to the relatively high degree of professional association in several Latin American countries, debates on the topic would be naturally stimulated.

Furthermore, and again somewhat contradictorily, among the 11

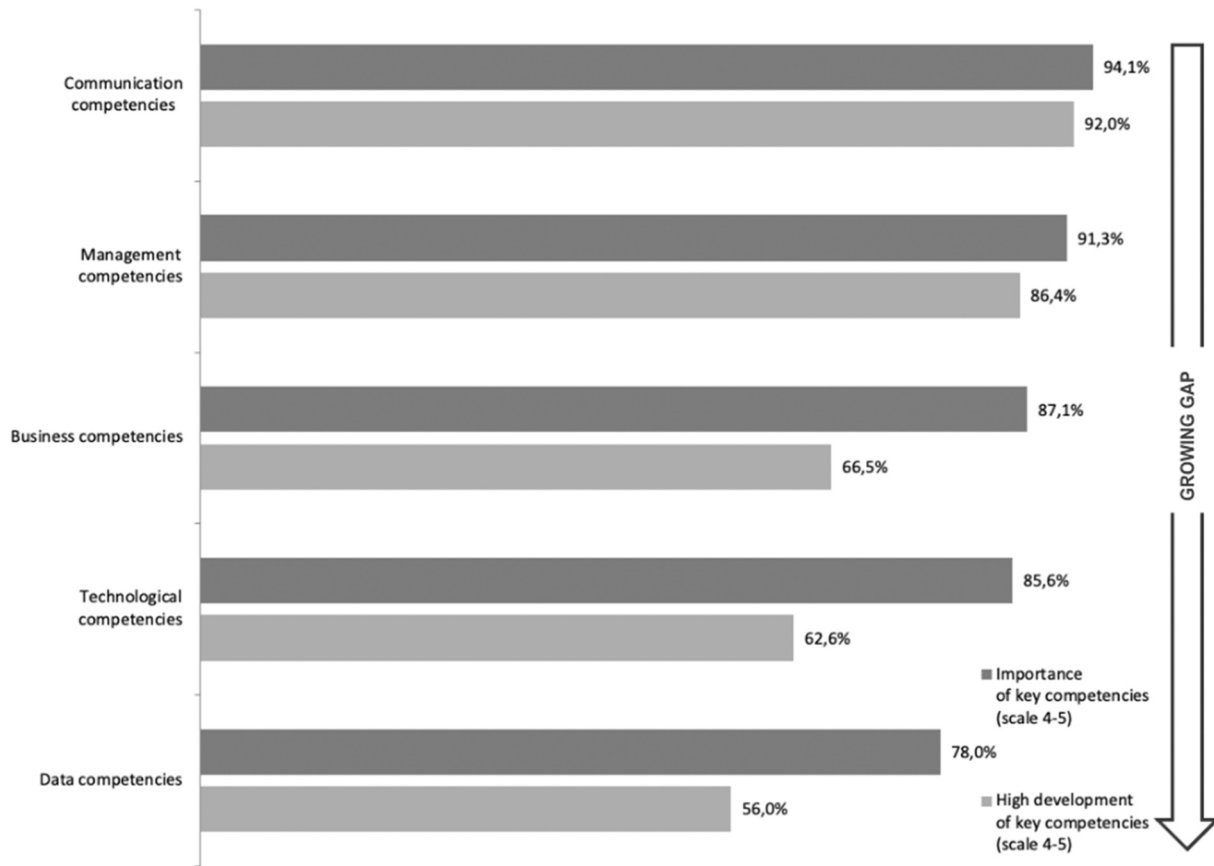


Fig. 4. : Key competencies: differences between perceived importance and personal qualification level. $n = 1683$ communication professionals from 20 countries. Q14: Competences are based on knowledge, skills and personal attributes. Some of these may be more important than others. In your opinion, how important are the following professional communication competencies, and how do you rate their personal level in each case? Scale 1 (Very low) - 5 (Very high). Percentages: Frequencies based on scale points 4–5.

most important strategic issues for public relations and communication management raised in this study, the issue of raising professional communication capabilities ranked second to last among the participants. This indicates a greater focus on issues that are not directly related to capability development.

In a rapidly evolving global context, a possible alternative to the ongoing *metamorphosis* of the scope and profile of the public relations professional would require further consideration of the merits of adopting a capability framework rather than a competency model. Because of its forward-looking and contextual flexibility, such a framework could foster more coordinated, high-performing teamwork in the volatile, complex and often unpredictable contexts that have historically existed in Latin America.

This is further supported by the consideration that the capability approach “also embraces the possibility of professionals being equipped to deal with a very different future in which roles will be subject to ‘disruptive change’ and where it is virtually impossible to describe what jobs will be like when, for example, re-shaped by artificial intelligence” (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019, p. 3). Such an approach could offer a better opportunity for the professional development of individuals, but also for the evolution of the disciplinary field as a whole, as Macnamara et al. (2018) argue.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The current context surrounding social and professional elements is undoubtedly an ever-changing one. The adoption of new digital technologies, from social media communication to the incorporation of generative artificial intelligence, is already of high organisational and

social impact. Hence, the demand for new technology and data capabilities for public relations professionals is becoming a crucially important aspect, joining other long-standing capabilities gaps, such as in business knowledge.

Bridging these gaps should be closely related to the investment that professionals should make in their own training (Moreno et al., 2017). In the post-pandemic world, where change is a constant, the dynamic development of professional capabilities should be seen as strategic in all fields.

The analysis undertaken in this study, and its consequent results, reveals a high awareness of the need to develop new capabilities for professionals in the sector: four out of every five Latin American public relations professionals consider it a necessity. In other words, fostering technological, data and business capabilities in Latin American professionals is perceived as fundamental.

Efforts to reduce capability gaps must be aligned with the individual efforts of communication professionals, as well as with the organisational efforts of their employers. Therefore, strategies regarding time and money spent on education and training is an essential consideration if the profession is to be relevant in the future.

In this context, both academia and professional associations face significant challenges in the region, where virtually all professionals already hold at least an undergraduate degree, and six out of ten are members of a national professional body.

Concerning foundational university education, mainly represented by undergraduate degrees, it should become increasingly robust in its teaching of a variety of subjects, trying to always promote critical thinking. This is of particular importance when it comes to data literacy, organisational purpose and strategy, sustainability, ethical dilemmas

and cultural change, techno-social appropriation, digitisation, and communication technology. Moreover, at the postgraduate level, this content should be approached from a much more specific professional lens, aimed at developing capabilities for managerial and policy functions in communication.

Regarding professional associations, the adoption of a similar perspective would be greatly beneficial, recognising the previously mentioned tensions and engaging in debates with industry. This perspective should complement their training in tools, trends and innovations, while continuing to strive for ongoing updates in operational functions.

7. Limitations and further research

As with any research based solely on collecting survey data, understanding the context and motivations of respondents is limited. It should be also noted that the survey was online during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic (between May and July 2020), when the shift to digital channels accelerated and posed a particular challenge for practitioners. This timing may have negatively impacted data quality.

This study depended entirely on the willingness of professionals to complete a relatively lengthy questionnaire; fatigue may have negatively influenced the quality of the data as well. Additionally, the response rate to the survey was under 10 %, meaning that some countries in the region lacked adequate representation for comparative analysis.

A slight majority of the respondents were semi-senior or senior professionals, so it can be reasonably assumed that digital innovation may be a more complex topic for them than for younger professionals. In the future, greater and more equitable participation would be needed to achieve a broader scope.

In terms of future research, this topic could open up interesting and necessary avenues, especially in the Latin American region. Some examples could be the following:

- Crisis of institutional representation can also extend to professional associations and their role. What challenges do the future hold for them? Will associative models focused on the defence of labour rights be sustainable or will they have to be more in tune with the needs of industry?
- A similar situation can be observed in academia. In the last decade, undergraduate degrees have been reduced in terms of length and core content (research methods, sociology, psychology, economics) in favour of more "applied" content. At the same time, the development of postgraduate degrees in the field is still to some extent in early stages in Latin America, which contrasts sharply with the situation, for example, in Europe (Álvarez-Nobell et al., 2022). hence, in which curricular direction should the field of strategic communication education, both at undergraduate and postgraduate level, be oriented? How should they complement each other?
- Would it be appropriate to think about in-company training for professionals in the current climate of high employment turnover and competition in the labour market for senior profiles?

These questions can serve as a basis in relation to the evolving dynamics of representativeness, educational content and sustainability of different models within professional associations and academic institutions.

Finally, the association of this study with the Global Communication Monitor project could promote its comparative analysis with similar studies conducted in other continents such as Europe (Zerfass et al., 2020), North America (Meng et al., 2021) and Asia (Macnamara et al., 2021). This could lead to the development of a more comprehensive picture of the capability gap phenomenon.

Declaration of Competing Interest

We, the authors of the paper titled "Capability gap in relation to public relations' strategic issues in Latin America," hereby declare that we have no conflicts of interest to disclose. We affirm that our research was conducted with utmost integrity and objectivity, and no personal, financial, or professional relationships could have influenced the findings or interpretations presented in this paper. Our sole purpose is to contribute to the academic discourse and advance knowledge in the field of public relations in Latin America.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

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