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The strategy applied to Public Relations in the digital environment: the Spanish case

La estrategia aplicada a las relaciones públicas en el medio digital: El caso español

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RESUMEN
Introducción: El propósito de este artículo es el de conocer si los departamentos de comunicación de las empresas españolas de mayor facturación planifican estratégicamente la actividad de relaciones públicas (RP) en el medio digital, cuál es la tipología y la función comunicativa de los planes que se diseñan y cuáles son las herramientas más utilizadas del ecosistema digital. **Metodología**: Para este cometido se cursó un cuestionario que fue enviado a los directivos funcionales de comunicación de esta tipología de empresas y que son socios de la Asociación de Directores de Comunicación-Dircom. **Resultados**: A partir del modelo de toma decisiones estratégicas de John Marston (1963) y contemplando las RP como una función directiva independiente y estratégica (Grunig y Hunt, 2003) hemos comprobado que la mayoría de los planes de RP de las empresas españolas en el medio digital son diseñados estratégicamente. **Discusión**: Estos datos contrastan con varios estudios realizados en los últimos años a nivel profesional, que indicaban que la gestión de las RP en el entorno digital era planteada tácticamente y con objetivos cortoplacistas. **Conclusiones**: Se confirma una tendencia hacia la profesionalización de la gestión estratégica de las RP en el ciberespacio, pero también se evidencia que existen aspectos propios del pensamiento estratégico aplicado que deben mejorar, como el uso de otros tipos de programas, más allá de los que procuran notoriedad y más allá de la función informativa. También el uso de nuevas herramientas digitales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ciberespacio; Comunicación Corporativa; Dircom; Comunicación Digital; Internet; Planificación Estratégica; Relaciones Públicas.

ABSTRACT
Introduction: The purpose of this article is to find out if the communication departments of the Spanish companies with the highest turnover strategically plan the public relations (PR) activity in the digital environment; what the typology and the communicative orientation of the plans that they design

are; and which the most used tools in the digital ecosystem are. **Methodology**: To do this, we sent a questionnaire to the functional communication managers of these types of companies and that are members of the Spanish Association of Directors of Communication-Dircom. **Results**: Based on the strategic decision-making model of John Marston (1963) and considering PR as an independent and strategic managerial function (Grunig and Hunt, 2003) we have verified that most of the PR plans of Spanish companies in the digital environment have been strategically designed. **Discussion**: These data contrast with several studies carried out in recent years at a professional level, which indicated that the management of PR in the digital environment was raised tactically and with short-term objectives. **Conclusions**: We confirm a trend towards professionalization of the strategic management of PR in cyberspace, but we also point out that there are aspects of applied strategic thinking that should be improved, such as the use of other types of programs, beyond those that they seek notoriety and beyond the informative function, and the use of new digital tools.

KEYWORDS: Cyberspace; Corporate Communication; Dircom; Digital Communication; Internet; Strategic Planning; Public Relations.

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Translation by Paula González (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

1. Introduction

The irruption of public relations in the digital space began in the 70s of the 20th century. Even so, it has been the digital revolution produced in the last four decades that has led to the analysis of this incursion into this professional field (Coombs, 1998; Johnson; 1997; Kent and Taylor, 1998) and has modified the professional practice of communication departments around the world (Cook, 2019; Cuenca-Fontbona et al., 2020; González-Canomanuel, 2019; Whatmough, 2018). Furthermore, at this time, the public relations budget has exceeded for the first time, with a proportion of 56%, offline investment (Scopen, 2021).

The digital maturity of company communication departments (Cuenca-Fontbona et al., 2020), the possibilities of interaction and dialogue between users fostered by the consolidation of Web 2.0 (Capriotti et al. 2019; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015), and the fact that digital platforms make it possible to improve any process in terms of precision, credibility, honesty, and trust (Wright et al., 2013), makes it easier for these departments to cultivate effective relationships in the digital agora, between the organizations they represent and their audiences, and, as a result, they can have a positive impact on the corporate image and reputation (Cuenca-Fontbona et al., 2020; Yaxley, 2012). Faced with this new digital scenario, the strategic planning process of public relations activity is essential to build and maintain trust (Oliveira, 2018; Zerfass et al., 2021), and influence and relate to the public (Matilla, 2018; Neill and Moody, 2015; Oliveira and Capriotti, 2019).

Strategic planning also implies resorting to the use of models, methods, techniques, and tools. The reference model in the field of public relations, which has been the inspiration for numerous subsequent models (Matilla, 2018), is the strategic decision-making process of John Marston (1981). A model structured in four stages, which must always be consistent with each other, named with the acronym RACE: the research stage (Research), the strategy stage (Action), the execution stage (Communication), and the evaluation stage (Evaluation). But, despite the importance that the academic literature gives to the application of the strategy to public relations, the truth is that, in practice, the management of public relations in the digital medium and, more specifically, that related to social media, has traditionally been raised in a rather tactical way and with short-term objectives and under the charge of technicians without strategic decision-making power (Belzunce and Aguirre, 2018; Capriotti et al. 2019; Grunig et al., 2021; Navarro et al., 2017; Zerfass et al., 2017). Macnamara and Zerfass (2012)

also conclude that in many organizations in different countries, digital communication, especially that circulating in social media, is neither integrated with the rest of organizational communication nor is it evaluated by any type of key indicator. Even so, there is currently a growing trend to incorporate the strategic function into the practice of public relations in cyberspace (Cuenca-Fontbona et al., 2020; Neill and Moody, 2015).

Starting from the conception of public relations as an independent and strategic managerial function (Cutlip et al., 2006; Grunig and Hunt, 2003; Marston, 1981; Van Ruler and Verčič, 2004) and, based on Marston's RACE model, the objective of this research is to find out if the communication departments of the organizations with the highest turnover in Spain strategically plan the public relations activity in the digital agora, what is the typology and communicative function of the plans, and what are the most used tools in planning, thus, providing value to academics and professionals in an emerging field of study.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The strategy applied to public relations

The strategy has been defined in various ways throughout history. For Chandler (cited by Sáez et al., 2015), it is the long-term determination of goals and objectives, actions, and allocation of resources. Ohmae (cited by Sáez et al., 2015) explains that it is the continuity of a perception of improvement based on commitment, competitiveness, creativity, and alignment to the organization, the client, and the competition. For their part, Ansoff and McDonnell (cited by Sáez et al., 2015) say that what it is about is producing a resource allocation pattern that offers the best results, to respond to the objectives of the organization in an always turbulent environment. And, for Porter (cited by Sáez et al., 2015), the strategy is a unique value proposition compared to the competition. Although the strategy is still a central idea of business management, there are currently a large number of disciplines that study, treat, and apply it from diverse scientific and professional perspectives such as communication and, specifically, public relations (Sáez et al., 2015).

The conception of public relations as an autonomous and managerial functional area within the organization, which dates back to the 1980s, understands this function to be directly dependent on senior management (Dircom, 2018; Van Ruler and Verčič, 2004; Xifra, 2017), from which the corporate strategy emanates (Sáez et al., 2015). From this perspective, public relations are a discipline directly linked to strategy and, thus, to strategic planning (Lock et al., 2020; Matilla, 2018; Otero and Pulido, 2018; Spell, 2021).

In the digital field, the purpose of public relations activity remains the same: trust management. Thus, the application of the strategy to this praxis will require a methodical planning process and, likewise, the consistent development of preliminary research (research), the design of an action plan (action), its implementation (communication), and a final evaluation (evaluation), like the one promulgated by Marston. Yaxley (2012, p. 431) also adds that the strategic process of public relations in the digital medium supposes "an opportunity for public relations to evolve in order to apply its existing strengths in earning coverage, building online relationships, and managing corporate reputation".

At this time, it is observed that the management of digital communication is a shared responsibility between different areas of the organization. However, it is the communication department that must coordinate the integration of offline and online activity in an organizational communication program (Aced, 2018). Furthermore, the first condition of any strategic approach is that offline and online communication be conceived as a whole, that they complement each other, and that they form part of the same integrated approach that, in turn, must be aligned and consistent with the corporate strategy. (Aced, 2018; Compte-Pujol et al., 2018).

2.2 The research (research)

A strategic approach requires starting from preliminary research since, otherwise, the professional can only be guided by mere intuition for decision making, instead of doing it empirically (Capriotti, 2021; Castillo-Esparcia and Villabona- Beltrán, 2018; Cuenca, 2018; Cuenca-Fontbona et al., 2020; Cutlip et

al., 2006; Grunig and Hunt, 2003; Madroñero and Capriotti, 2018; Marston, 1981; Matilla, 2018; Otero and Pulido, 2018; Spell, 2021; Xifra, 2017).

This first stage implies, on the one hand, compiling preliminary information on the internal and external situation of the organization and, on the other hand, analyzing audiences' perceptions through public relations audits (Cuenca, 2018; Matilla, 2018).

For Matilla (2018), this stage can be divided, in turn, into two more specific sub-stages: preliminary information and research itself. In the preliminary information phase, the founding creed, general audiences map, organizational structure, philosophy and management style, corporate personality and identity, corporate culture, corporate image, corporate reputation, corporate notoriety, visual identity, competitive environment, SWOT analysis, and P.E.S.T.E.L analysis, must be defined. Next, the research stage must be developed, which can be basic (with techniques such as personal or participant observation, formal or informal conversations, etc.) or applied (including, among others, environmental research, audits of perceptions and attitudes, the communication audit, and the social or relations audit). To conclude this first stage, an analysis of all the information and data obtained must be carried out to, finally, establish a diagnosis of the situation, which allows empirically identifying the communication problem to be solved through a strategic plan.

The interpretation of this initial information and its projection in the face of an uncertain future allows future scenarios to be identified and any possible deviation to be measured (Matilla, 2018; Otero and Pulido, 2018; Oliveira, 2018; Spell, 2021; Xifra, 2017). Based on this diagnosis, it will be possible to design an action plan in the digital sphere aligned with possible scenarios.

2.3. The strategy (action)

The second stage of the strategic planning process, the action, responds to the design of a plan typology categorized by Xifra (2017) in commercial or marketing support, institutional, of notoriety, purpose and corporate image and reputation, and crisis, educational or awareness, of social action, and, also, internal communication projects (Cuenca and Verazzi, 2020). It also responds to the communicative function of the program: information, influence, persuasion, education, dialogue, commitment, entertainment, or loyalty (Grunig and Hunt, 2003; Matilla, 2018; Neill and Moody, 2015; Oliveira and Capriotti, 2019; Smith, 2020; Xifra, 2017) that must be based on preliminary empirical research and that must contribute to the achievement of previously set objectives (Capriotti, 2021; Madroñero and Capriotti, 2018; Matilla, 2018; Otero and Pulido, 2018; Smith, 2020; Spell, 2021; Xifra, 2017). The concept of planning, the basic axis of any strategy, consists of determining and analyzing the strategic audiences of a map of previously configured audiences (Oliveira, 2018), in setting goals and objectives, establishing strong ideas and messages, and in selecting digital tools. Its purpose is to relate the attitudes, opinions, ideas, and reactions of the audiences derived from the research stage, with the policies and programs of the organization (Matilla, 2018). Creativity, innovation, and its adaptation to the digital environment also strengthen any approach that wants to present itself as strategic (Moreno et al., 2017).

The existing literature about the strategic stage in the field of public relations in the digital medium refers only to the media ecosystem. Several authors agree that digital channels are being used in an integrated way to communicate and influence internal audiences (Ewing et al., 2019; Maarit Lipiäinen et al., 2014) and external audiences (Capriotti and González-Herrero, 2017; García García et al., 2017; Navarro et al., 2017). On the other hand, Hanna et al. (2011), insist on the need to develop an integrated communication ecosystem that allows the combination of channels to achieve a greater capacity to influence audiences. In this same sense, for Luo et al. (2015) what is essential is to strategically integrate and align the management of digital platforms with corporate objectives and with the rest of the communication program. They also highlight that digital tools, especially, those related to social networks, help public relations professionals to scan the environment, listen to different audiences, and generate dialogue, essential issues for any strategic thinking in communication.

According to the results of the European Communication Monitor -ECM- (Zerfass et al., 2020), blogs and social networks, as well as websites, e-mail, and intranets, are the most used digital communication tools in any communication strategy. Specifically, in the field of internal communication, the importance of digitizing the forms of communication and strengthening the digital infrastructure of the organization itself is growing to favor the flow of internal communication and between teams (Zerfass

et al., 2021). And four channels are identified as an upward trend: corporate social networks, mobile apps, online videos, and intranets (Cuenca and Verazzi, 2020). In general, the situation caused by COVID-19 has highlighted the need to invest in strong and solvent virtual solutions (Gallagher, 2021). Concerning external communication, several authors highlight the potential of blogs and web pages to strategically manage relations with audiences, stimulate interaction and corporate transparency, and even communicate the activity of the corporate social responsibility-CSR- policy (Navarro et al., 2017). The ECM 2020 study points out that social networks are at the top of the list of tools most used by communication professionals in their strategic approaches (Zerfass et al., 2020), and Roshan et al. (2016) emphasize the advantages of social networks to prevent conflict scenarios or deal with crises.

2.4. The execution (communication)

Execution of the public relations plan is the third stage of Marston's strategic process. It involves directing, in a manner consistent with the previous stages, the implementation of public relations techniques and digital tools that have been decided in the planning stage (Matilla, 2018; Otero and Pulido, 2018; Spell, 2021; Xifra, 2017). At this stage, the fundamental elements that must be contrasted to validate compliance with the principles of the Marstonian strategic process are: the administration of the budget that is allocated to digital communication, time management, quality control, or the formative evaluation, and, in this sense, the importance of monitoring the digital plan is carried out as the actions are executed to correct any imbalance regarding the initially proposed goals and objectives, and, finally, the direction of teamwork (Matilla, 2018; Otero and Pulido, 2018; Spell, 2021; Xifra, 2017).

2.5. The evaluation (evaluation)

Finally, the evaluation stage consists of assessing whether the deployed strategy has had success, impact, interest, and/or acceptance among audiences (Lindenmann, 1990; Marca, 2018; Matilla, 2018; Otero and Pulido, 2018; Spell, 2021; Watson and Noble, 2014; Xifra, 2017). In other words, "it serves to know which aspects of the plan have worked, but, above all, which have failed, analyzing the possible causes of that failure to draw conclusions and make the appropriate corrections" (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 377).

The final, or summative, evaluation is a key stage in most public relations strategic planning models. However, although academics and professionals recognize the vital importance of evaluation (Cuenca-Fontbona, 2020; Marca, 2018; Xifra, 2017) to consolidate the strategic nature of public relations, the former treat the subject of evaluation tangentially and, the latter evaluate their plans superficially, without taking into account the objectives or the decision of what the measurement indicators or Key Performance Indicators- KPI- should be (Balance Scorecard Institute, 2021; Buhmann and Likely, 2018; Buhmann et al., 2019; Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012; Macnamara and Gregory, 2018; Marca, 2018; Watson and Noble, 2014; Zerfass et al., 2017). The IPR Measurement Commission study already predicted that, although digitization is the technological trend that most affects the public relations profession, few believe it to "have a research-led strategic insight function" (Adi, 2019), therefore, measurement and evaluation will continue to be a challenge for public relations in the coming years to consolidate its strategic proposal (AMEC, 2020, 2021).

3. Objectives

The main objective of this research is to verify if the professionals of the communication departments of the companies with the highest turnover in Spain strategically design public relations plans in the digital medium.

As secondary objectives, it is desired to find out what is the typology and the preeminent communicative function of the plans and what are the most used digital tools in strategic planning.

This study has been based on three research questions:

1. RQ1. Are public relations plans in the digital environment designed following the four-stage strategic planning process (research, planning, execution, and evaluation)?

2. RQ2. What purpose and communicative function do public relations plans usually have in the digital medium?

3. RQ3. What digital tools are the most used in public relations plans in the digital medium?

4. Methodology

Firstly, the specialized literature on strategic planning in the field of public relations was reviewed, as well as on the digitalization of this discipline, to find out what the state of public relations programs was in the digital agora. Second, a self-administered questionnaire was designed to find out what the professional practice of the communication department was in each of the four phases of strategic planning (Marston, 1981), the typology of the plans, their communicative function, and the digital ecosystem used. The instrument was validated by ten academic and professional experts in the area of PR and organizational communication outside the research team. After carrying out a preliminary test, the questionnaire was sent to a sample of experts according to an eminently professional profile since they are people who direct and/or carry out tasks directly related to the model object of the research, that is, they have the power to strategically design public relations plans in the digital agora and, therefore, can contribute their experience and reflective capacity about the profession.

4.1. Sample

The questionnaire, written in Spanish, was sent by email, within the framework of remote administration methods, in two consecutive weekly waves carried out between November 9th and 22nd, 2020, to the electronic addresses of N=1,067 functional communication directors of the Spanish companies with the highest turnover with more than 5 years of experience. All the participants are members of the Association of Communication Directors-Dircom[1] which, due to their high level of representativeness, constitute a quality sample. The contact information of this sample was obtained from the last Dircom 2017[2] public directory and the electronic addresses were obtained, one by one, from various sources and by hand. 18 experts between professionals and academics participated in the pre-test. The profile of the experts was determined following three criteria: a) that they accumulated more than 5 years of experience; b) that they were reputable specialists in the sector (heads of agencies, associations, and/or professional colleges in the field of public relations and communication, company communication directors, members of academic institutions that are in national and international research teams), and c) with extensive knowledge of the discipline and professional reality.

A total of 186 respondents started the questionnaire and 134 completed it. After eliminating the responses of the participants who could not be clearly identified as part of the target population, the analysis was carried out based on the responses of n=124 professionals who answered every one of the questions posed, representing 11.62% of the population size (error +/-8 and trust level 0.95).

The sociodemographic profile of n=124 was mostly female (54%), with ages mainly between 35 and 50 years. The geographical area of origin was concentrated mainly between Madrid and Barcelona, although we also obtained some responses in cities such as Valencia, Seville, and Bilbao.

The Dircom directory classifies companies into 10 sectoral categories, which made it possible for the sample of communication managers to be heterogeneous. The responses received belonged to organizations in the category of Services and Leisure (27.4%), Food, Drinks, and Tobacco (15.3%), Commerce and Distribution (14.5%), Audits, Consultants, and Law Firms (4.8%), Telecommunications,

[1] The Dircom association is a professional association that brings together managers and communication professionals from Spanish companies, institutions, and consultancies. It was born in 1992 from the initiative of a group of outstanding communication professionals motivated by the growing importance and scope of their responsibilities in the company and society. Dircom's vision is to value the function of communication and the director of communication in organizations, in such a way that said competence and its managers are considered as a strategic area and manager. Its mission is carried out through four strategic axes: recognition, professional development, networking, and responsible management/CSR. http://www.dircom.org/sobre-dircom/que-es-dircom

[2] Dircom Directory 2017. Communication Yearbook 2017. Almería: Almería Press Association – FAPE. http://almeria.fape.es/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/DIRCOM_Directorio_2017.pdf

IT, and Internet (10.5%), Chemical and Pharmaceutical Sector (10.5%), Construction, Iron and Steel, Energy, and Electricity (4%), Automotive, Transportation, Highways, and Parking (7.3%), Financial Entities, Banks, Savings Banks, and Managers (4%), and Insurance (1.6%).

4.2. Questionnaire and statistical analysis

The methodology used is quantitative and the questionnaire included in its research 20 questions related to the praxis of the communication department in each of the different stages of strategic planning of public relations, the typology of the plans, their communicative function, and the digital ecosystem used.

Table 1. Strategic process of public relations plans in the digital medium

Research Question (RQ)	Questionnaire question	Typology
RQ1. Are public relations plans in the digital environment designed following the four-stage strategic planning process (research, planning, execution, and evaluation)?	Are the strategic plans for public relations in the digital medium strategically coordinated with the rest of the communication operations?	Likert Scale
	Do we start from some kind of preliminary research before designing a strategic plan for public relations in the digital medium?	Likert Scale
	Do we reflect and define, in the first place, the objectives, topics, and messages to convey, strategic audiences, and digital channels of dissemination, to design a strategic plan for public relations in the digital medium?	Likert Scale
	Do we give much importance to creativity in the creation of digital content?	Likert Scale
	Do we have the content adapted to the digital environment (visual, interactive, participatory, collaborative, personalized design, adequate content update frequency)?	Likert Scale
	Are the main processes of the communication department automated through different digital platforms?	Likert Scale
	Are the strategic plans for public relations in the digital medium evaluated using QUANTITATIVE indicators?	Likert Scale
	Are the strategic plans for public relations in the digital medium evaluated using QUALITATIVE indicators?	Likert Scale
RQ2. What purpose and communicative function do public relations plans usually have in the digital medium?	Do we design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium for brand awareness and/or corporate awareness?	Likert Scale
	In a situation of vulnerability, risk, or crisis, is the use of strategic public relations plans in the digital medium essential for our organization?	Likert Scale
	Do we design strategic plans for public relations in the digital medium for the corporate or reputational image?	Likert Scale
	Do we design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium to support marketing (product/service)?	Likert Scale
	Do we design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium related to the corporate purpose?	Likert Scale
	Do we design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium of internal communication?	Likert Scale

	Do we design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium to support social actions (RSC)?	Likert Scale
	Do we design strategic plans for public relations in the digital medium of awareness/education?	Likert Scale
	Do we design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium in the field of institutional relations?	Likert Scale
	What is the communicative function of public relations plans in the digital medium?	Multiple-choice answer
RQ3. What digital tools are the most used in public relations plans in the digital medium?	How often do we use internal digital communication tools: email, Intranet, (internal) newsletter, webinars, corporate apps, online corporate events, blogs, messaging, internal social networks?	Likert Scale
	How often do we use external digital communication tools: website, email, social networks, newsletter, online corporate events, webinars, blogs, digital press room, apps, podcasts, wikis?	Likert Scale

Source: Own elaboration.

For the single-answer numerical typology questions (strategic planning stages), a seven-level metric (Likert scale) was established (from totally disagree with an ordinal score of 1, to totally agree with an ordinal score of 7). For the analysis, the summative possibility offered by the scale was used. Thus, to present the results, the groups of elements from each of the two opposite parts of the scale have been reasonably added, considering scores 1, 2, and 3 (different degrees of disagreement) in disagreement with the question raised, and, at 5, 6, and 7 (different degrees of agreement) in agreement with the question raised. The score of 4 (neither disagree nor agree) has been considered neutral. For the multiple-choice answer categorical typology questions (typology, communicative function, and digital ecosystem of the plans), the options were established using checkboxes.

For the analysis of the absolute frequencies (Fa) and the relative frequencies (Fr) of the results and the existing correlation between the stages of the strategic process, the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) was used. Results were statistically tested using Pearson's correlation (r) and paired samples t-test.

5. Results

5.1. Strategic planning of public relations in the digital medium

The results of the study show important similarities in the opinions expressed by professionals from communication departments regarding the strategic praxis of public relations plans in the digital medium.

A previous issue, a prelude to any strategic approach and on which there is unanimity among the heads of the analyzed sample, is that the public relations plans in the digital medium that are drawn up are related to the rest of the communication operations that are promoted in the communication department (91.1%).

Although the study does not ask about the type of research that is designed, the results do explain that most professionals say they outline strategic public relations plans in the digital medium based on some type of preliminary research (87.9%). Few do not believe that preliminary research is relevant in their approaches to digital communication, or who do not carry out any type of preliminary research (4%) (Table 2).

Most professionals specify that they plan by reflecting on and defining the communication objectives, specifying the topics and messages to be disseminated, determining the strategic audiences and the digital channels of dissemination, and all this, always based on the information provided by preliminary research. The initiation of a strategic plan through preliminary research coincides, to a large extent,

with this strategic vision that a large part of the senior executives responsible for communication in the companies in the sample (95.2%) claim to have. The sample of those who seem to give little or no importance to having to fix the issues of this second stage of the planning process (2.4%) is scarce. In another order of ideas, the experts, to invigorate the strategy, also give great importance to creativity in content creation (83.0%) and having it correctly adapted to the digital environment and declined according to strategic audiences (84%).

When asked about the logistics of implementing the public relations program in the digital medium, more than three-quarters of the sample explained that they have automated their main execution processes through different digital platforms, be it design, account managers, responses, data storage, shipments, and even the monitoring of plans (71.8%) to execute any strategic approach with guarantees (Table 2). However, there is still a significant volume of managers who state that they still do not have optimal automation of the execution processes of public relations plans (10.4%).

Finally, regarding the evaluation of strategic public relations plans in the digital medium, this same stage has been questioned, separately, about the quantitative and qualitative methodology. In the same Table 2, it can be seen that the majority of professionals state that the evaluation is carried out through quantitative key performance indicators such as notoriety ratios, the growth of the community or followers, or the engagement rate and using corporate reputation metrics, monitors, online bookmarks, or even clipping services (83.9%). There are some of the departments that either are not sufficiently advanced (8.9%) or do not use measurement tools or indicators (7.2%). And, in general, they also state that they do some kind of qualitative evaluation to make better decisions (90.3%). There are few programs with null or almost null qualitative monitoring (5.6%), or that do not apply any at all (4%).

Table 2. Strategic process of public relations plans in the digital medium

	1		2		3		4		5		6		7	
	Fa	**Fr**	**Fa**	**Fr**	**Fa**	**Fr**	**Fa**	**Fr**	**Fa**	**Fr**	**Fa**	**Fr**	**Fa**	**Fr**
The strategic plans for public relations in the digital medium are strategically coordinated with the rest of the communication operations	1	0,8%	1	0,8%	2	1,6%	7	5,6%	21	16,9%	26	21,0%	66	53,2%
We start with some type of preliminary research before designing a strategic plan for public relations in the digital medium.	2	1,6%	1	0,8%	2	1,6%	10	8,1%	16	12,9%	28	22,6%	65	52,4%
We reflect on and define, first of all, the objectives, topics, and messages to convey, strategic audiences, and digital channels of dissemination, to design a strategic plan for public relations in the digital medium.	1	0,8%	1	0,8%	1	0,8%	3	2,4%	15	12,1%	25	20,2%	78	62,9%

We attach great importance to creativity in the creation of digital content.	0	0,0%	2	1,6%	4	3,2%	15	12,1%	21	16,9%	31	25,0%	51	41,1%
We have content adapted to the digital environment (visual, interactive, participatory, collaborative, personalized design, appropriate content update frequency).	0	0,0%	1	0,8%	5	4,0%	14	11,3%	24	19,4%	40	32,3%	40	32,3%
The main processes of the communication department are automated through different digital platforms.	4	3,2%	3	2,4%	6	4,8%	22	17,7%	33	26,6%	31	25,0%	25	20,2%
The strategic plans for public relations in the digital medium are evaluated through QUANTITATIVE indicators (c)	2	1,6%	4	3,2%	3	2,4%	11	8,9%	19	15,3%	29	23,4%	56	45,2%
The strategic plans for public relations in the digital medium are evaluated through QUALITATIVE indicators (k)	2	1,6%	2	1,6%	3	2,4%	5	4,0%	31	25,0%	29	23,4%	52	41,9%

Source: Own elaboration.

5.2. Typology of public relations plans in the digital medium

Public relations plans in the digital medium are mainly designed to increase the notoriety and awareness of the corporate brand (83.9%), while protecting the corporate image and reputation (83.0%), a type of program that is associated with the argument of 86.3% of the sample, according to which, public relations in the digital field are fundamental in a situation of vulnerability, risk, or crisis (Table 3).

Besides these first three typologies, there are, on the one hand, a series of approaches to support the marketing function (80.6%), and, on the other hand, that of publicizing the corporate purpose (78.2%). Another relevant fact to observe in Table 3 is the identification of a significant volume of programs aimed at internal audiences (71.8%). Finally, the possibilities offered by the virtual space also occur in the communication of CSR policies (63.7%), followed by the design of awareness or education programs (53%), and in the field of institutional relations or public affairs (49%).

Table 3. Typology of public relations plans in the digital medium

	1		2		3		4		5		6		7	
	Fa	**Fr**	**Fa**	**Fr**	**Fa**	**Fr**	**Fa**	**Fr**	**Fa**	**Fr**	**Fa**	**Fr**	**Fa**	**Fr**
We design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium for brand awareness and/or corporate awareness.	5	4,0%	6	4,8%	2	1,6%	7	5,6%	14	11,3%	33	26,6%	57	46,0%

In a situation of vulnerability, risk, or crisis, the use of strategic public relations plans in the digital medium is essential for our organization.	7	5,6%	1	0,8%	5	4,0%	4	3,2%	17	13,7%	19	15,3%	71	57,3%
We design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium of corporate image or reputation.	4	3,2%	4	3,2%	5	4,0%	8	6,5%	17	13,7%	36	29,0%	50	40,3%
We design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium to support marketing (product/ service).	5	4,0%	1	0,8%	6	4,8%	12	9,7%	19	15,3%	28	22,6%	53	42,7%
We design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium related to the corporate purpose.	5	4,0%	4	3,2%	4	3,2%	14	11,3%	18	14,5%	25	20,2%	54	43,5%
We design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium of internal communication.	8	6,5%	4	3,2%	7	5,6%	16	12,9%	35	28,2%	30	24,2%	24	19,4%
We design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium to support social actions (CSR)	7	5,6%	13	10,5%	12	9,7%	13	10,5%	19	15,3%	19	15,3%	41	33,1%
We design strategic plans for public relations in the digital medium of awareness/education.	10	8,1%	13	10,5%	16	12,9%	19	15,3%	17	13,7%	13	10,5%	36	29,0%
We design strategic public relations plans in the digital medium in the field of institutional relations.	20	16,1%	17	13,7%	10	8,1%	16	12,9%	26	21,0%	21	16,9%	14	11,3%

Source: Own elaboration.

5.3. Communicative function of public relations plans in the digital medium

Regarding the communicative function of public relations plans in the digital medium, a certain divergence can be observed in the opinions of the surveyed professionals. For some, any action is designed solely to inform (80.6%), for others the goal is to build loyalty (58.1%), influence (50.8%), or persuade strategic audiences (46%). Educating (31.5%), dialoguing (21.0%), engaging (16.1%) or entertaining (16.1%) would be other basic functions (Table 4).

Table 4. The communicative function of public relations plans in the digital medium

	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency
Inform	100	80,6%
Build loyalty	72	58,1%
To influence	63	50,8%
Persuade	57	46,0%
Educate	39	31,5%
Dialogue	26	21,0%
Engage	20	16,1%
Entertain	20	16,1%
Other	17	13,7%

n=124 professionals respond (multiple choice answer) about each of the communicative functions.

Source: Own elaboration.

5.4. Ecosystem of digital public relations plans

Lastly, regarding the digital ecosystem of public relations plans, it is observed how e-mail (95.2%) is the most used internally and the Web page externally (100%), (Table 5).

In digital approaches to internal communication, besides email, other common tools are the Intranet (82.2%), the Newsletter format (74.2%), Webinars (69.4%), corporate apps (68 .5%), online corporate events (64.5%), and Blogs (52.4%). Those that also play a relevant role are online messaging such as WhatsApp or Telegram (41.1%) and internal social networks such as Sharepoint, Yammer, Workplace, or Chatter (38.8%).

Regarding external communication, the strategy involves the use, besides the corporate website, of email (87.9%) and social networks, especially Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter and those that allow the articulation of audiovisual, graphic, and interactive formats, such as YouTube and Instagram (86.3%). Like the results obtained internally, the Newsletter (73.4%), online corporate events (64.5%), Webinars (58.1%), and Blogs (54%) are also common tools. Furthermore, more than half of the communication departments have a digital newsroom enabled (53.2%). Apps (30.6%), Podcasts (24.2%), and Wikis (21%) are of incipient use.

Table 5. The ecosystem of public relations plans in the digital medium

Internal digital ecosystem	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency	External digital ecosystem	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency
Email	118	95,2%	Web page	124	100%
Intranet	102	82,2%	Email	109	87,9%
Newsletter (internal)	92	74,2%	Social networks	107	86,3%
Webinars	86	69,4%	Newsletter	91	73,4%
Corporate apps	85	68,5%	Online corporate events	80	64,5%
Online corporate events	80	64,5%	Webinars	72	58,1%
Blogs	59	52,4%	Blogs	67	54,0%
Online messaging	50	41,1%	Digital newsroom	66	53,2%
Internal social networks	48	38,8%	Apps	38	30,6%
			Podcasts	30	24,2%
			Wikis	26	21,0%

n=124 professionals respond (multiple choice answer) about each of the digital channels.

Source: Own elaboration.

The Marstonian strategic planning stages must be consistent with each other. The way to check this coherence is by establishing correlations between the different stages. In this way, it is observed that, between the preliminary research and the strategic stage ($r= 0.575$, $p \leq 0.01$), the execution stage ($r= 0.105$, $p \leq 0.01$), and the evaluation stage, both quantitative ($r= 0.395$, $p \leq 0.01$) and qualitative ($r= 0.469$, $p \leq 0.01$), there is a direct association, that is, there are no differences between the diagnosis, the strategy, the execution, and the evaluation. The same happens when strategic planning is correlated with execution ($r= 0.141$, $p \leq 0.01$), quantitative evaluation ($r= 0.388$, $p \leq 0.01$), and qualitative evaluation ($r= 0.567$, $p \leq 0.01$). Likewise, there is coherence between the execution stage and the quantitative ($r= 0.160$, $p \leq 0.01$) and qualitative ($r= 0.382$, $p \leq 0.01$) evaluation (Table 6).

Table 6. *Consistency between the stages of strategic planning*

	% Stage	% Stage	Gap	Significance
Research vs strategy	87,9%	95,2%	- 7,3%	(r= 0,575, p ≤ 0.01)
Research vs execution	87,9%	78,8%	9,1%	(r= 0,105, p= ≤ 0.01)
Research vs evaluation (c)	87,9%	83,9%	4,0%	(r= 0,395, p ≤ 0.01)
Research vs evaluation (k)	87,9%	90,3%	- 2,4%	(r= 0,469, p ≤ 0.01)
Strategy vs execution	95,2%	78,8%	16,4%	(r= 0,141, p= ≤ 0.01)
Strategy vs evaluation (c)	95,2%	83,9%	11,3%	(r= 0,388, p ≤ 0.01)
Strategy vs evaluation (k)	95,2%	90,3%	4,9%	(r= 0,567, p ≤ 0.01)
Execution vs evaluation (c)	78,8%	83,9%	- 5,1%	(r= 0,160, p= ≤ 0.01)
Execution vs evaluation (k)	78,8%	90,3%	- 11,5%	(r= 0,382, p ≤ 0.01)

The scale shows reliability of 0.74 (Cronbach's Alpha).

Source: Own elaboration.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The results obtained allow answering the three research questions (RQ) linked to the previously established objectives.

Regarding RQ1, taking as a reference John Marston's strategic decision-making model devised in 1963 (Marston, 1981) and considering public relations as an independent and strategic managerial function (Grunig and Hunt, 2003), it can be verified that most of the public relations plans of Spanish companies in the digital environment are strategically designed. This would evidence the growing trend, of which Neill and Moody (2015) and Cuenca-Fontbona et al. (2020) already talked about, to incorporate the strategic function into the practice of public relations in cyberspace, further reinforced by the meritorious digital maturity that Spanish companies boast of (Cuenca-Fontbona, et al., 2020).

Likewise, these data contrast with what has been the norm in praxis in recent years, as shown by the studies by Belzunce and Aguirre (2018), Grunig et al. (2021), Macnamara and Zerfass (2012); Navarro et al. (2017), or Zerfass et al. (2017), who claimed that, in general, public relations management in the digital environment has been approached in a rather tactical manner and with short-term objectives.
Likewise, it is detected that the vast majority of public relations plans in the digital medium, of any typology and communicative function studied, are coordinated with the other units of a communication plan, as recommended by the specialized literature (Aced, 2018; Compte-Pujol et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2015). This presupposes that communication professionals work methodically, from the beginning. These results differ from previous studies such as Macnamara and Zerfass (2012), which concluded that, in many organizations around the world, digital communication was not integrated with the rest of organizational communication. It can be deduced that a clear evolution of the discipline is manifested in this new medium.

The literature is unanimous in demanding preliminary research and its consequent diagnosis as a stage previous to the development of the strategic approach (Capriotti, 2021; Castillo-Esparcia and Villabona-Beltrán, 2018; Cuenca, 2018; Cutlip et al., 2006; Grunig and Hunt, 2003; Madroñero and Capriotti, 2018; Marston, 1981; Matilla, 2018; Otero and Pulido, 2018; Spell, 2021; Xifra, 2017). Following the requirements described above, it is observed that Spanish organizations, before making any strategic decision in this communication field, start from preliminary research. Although there is a fundamental preliminary question that cannot be known in detail with the present study, the type of preliminary research that is designed, it would confirm even more that it operates according to a planning process model.

Besides the preliminary research, the reflection that is ensured to be exercised on the objectives, messages, and strategic audiences, although it cannot be known if it is based on a previous audience map as Oliveira (2018) points out, to propose the most convenient action and the great concern that what is outlined be innovative and creative, as the previous studies by Moreno et al. (2017) point out, would also be aligned with this idea of the strategic approach that seems to be permeating communication departments.

The answers that have been obtained about the fourth Marstonian stage, evaluation, indicate that the research carried out by professionals handles both methodologies, quantitative and qualitative, to assess the performance of public relations in the digital medium and facilitate decision-making.

Likewise, it is observed that the four planning stages appear directly related to each other. This correlation also leads us to think that public relations plans in the digital medium are consistent and, thus, can be considered strategic approaches.

On what type of public relations plans in the digital medium are more common (RQ2), it is concluded that those that have to do with notoriety, the impact to make themselves known, and preserve a positive image, and not so much in pursuing the interest and/or acceptance among the public, predominate. Professionals understand that presence on the internet is important to have a persistent presence and sustain a better perception. Support for the marketing function is also relevant but it is not the main typology.

Although the main purpose of public relations is to influence strategic audiences (Grunig and Hunt, 2003; Matilla, 2018; Smith, 2020; Xifra, 2017), there are other types of communicative functions such as informing, focused on the content and communication channels, and building loyalty, focused on retaining the public. These stick out ahead of influencing. On this issue, it is surprising that building loyalty is a pre-eminent approach, especially when the typology of programs is said to focus on achieving awareness and ensuring the corporate image. On the other hand, the lower relevance of the typology of commercial or marketing programs coincides with the fact that the persuasive function is not the most important communicative orientation of public relations plans in the digital medium.
About the digital media ecosystem, internal email and external websites are the most used digital tools when public relations actions are planned in the digital environment (RQ3). In fact, in the external scenario, the possibilities offered by the website as a tool to strategically manage relations with the public were already pointed out in previous studies, such as that by Navarro et al. (2017). Social networks are positioned as key tools in both scenes, in line with the recent trends advanced by Cuenca and Verazzi (2020) and Zerfass et al. (2020, 2021). The communicative intention is not channeled exclusively through social networks in the digital approaches of internal communication but they do seem to be the absolute protagonists in external communication.
With this study, it is confirmed that the recent trend to professionalize the management of public relations in cyberspace has already been incorporated into the communication departments of Spanish companies. On the one hand, integrating their practice to other organizational communication activities, and, on the other, incorporating long-term strategic planning processes and breaking with traditional tactical and short-term management. Although companies are increasingly taking advantage of the benefits that the online ecosystem offers them to develop effective relationships with their audiences, this study shows some evidence that there are still aspects to improve in the strategic management of digital public relations, related to experimenting with typologies of approaches, when strategically required, beyond notoriety and the informative function or the use of new digital tools.

7. Limitations and future lines of research

Despite the obtained results, this study has certain limitations. In the first place, it is noted that neither the selected universe nor the analysis sample is representative of all Spanish companies or communication directors who exercise their functional responsibility in the Spanish State, a universe that it has not been possible to documentarily identify. Additionally, participation according to the economic category has been unequal and this limits any comparative analysis or conclusion of a sectoral type. However, the number of respondents provides an adequate basis to analyze patterns in their answers corresponding to the practice of public relations in the digital environment and allows the results of the research to be considered as general trends in Spain.

Regarding future lines of research, it would be interesting to learn more about issues such as the type of preliminary research that is carried out before undertaking an action, a campaign, or a strategic plan, and its quantitative and qualitative evaluation, to understand the reasons behind the decisions of the communication professional when strategically planning in the digital medium.

In turn, this research is planned to be repeated with professionals from organizations in other countries to contrast and correlate the praxis between countries.

Finally, we also want to explore other conditions that, hypothetically, could condition the strategic approach to public relations in the digital agora, for example, academic training and, thus, the competence of the person in charge of the organization's communication area; the responsibilities, functions, and structure of the communication department; and, the presence of this person in the boards of directors and their active participation in corporate decisions.

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