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Measuring and Evaluating Social Media in Corporate Communications: Challenges and Recommendations

Paula Pineda-Martínez
University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)
paula.pineda@ehu.eus

Juan Carlos Miguel-de-Bustos
University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)
jc.miguel@ehu.eus

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: As social media have become an increasingly strategic channel for communication and public relations professionals, its measurement and evaluation have become a growing concern. This research aims to explore the social media measurement and evaluation practices in the communication and public relations departments of large companies in Spain, examining the characteristics of this measurement and evaluation process. **Methodology:** A mixed-method approach is applied, combining in-depth interviews with surveys in which communication and public relations professionals participated. **Results:** The results indicate that social media measurement and evaluation is still in an early stage. Although most companies claim to have a strategic social media plan, the objectives set do not meet the desirable SMART criteria. In some cases, organizations maintain a presence on platforms for which they have not established objectives or implement actions without a clear link to specific goals. Furthermore, more than 20% of the companies studied do not conduct social media evaluation, and approximately half do not fully leverage the potential of the data obtained from their measurements. **Discussion and conclusions:** Based on these findings, the study offers practical recommendations to optimize measurement and evaluation processes in the digital environment, thereby strengthening the strategic role of communication and public relations within organizations.

Keywords: public relations; strategic communication; social networks; Internet; evaluation; measurement; big data.

1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, the academic community has emphasized the importance of research as a central component of the strategic process in communication and public relations. In the specific case of evaluation, various theories, frameworks, and models have been developed, and over the past two decades, this topic has been at the forefront of conferences, workshops, and academic and professional associations in the field.

The adoption of evaluation in practice has been much slower than its development at the academic level. It wasn't until the rise of aspects such as the Internet, big data (Gregory & Halff, 2020; Fitzpatrick & Weissman, 2021), and more recently, generative artificial intelligence (Buhmann & White, 2022; CIPR, 2023; Gregory et al., 2023), that data-driven management began to be much more prominent on the agenda of professionals. Nevertheless, the call for accurate evaluation in communication and public relations still seems to be relevant (Macnamara, 2023).

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of professional measurement and evaluation practices in the communications and public relations sector, addressing the specific need for research on practices carried out in the online environment (Fitzpatrick & Weissman, 2021). To this end, the research focuses on examining the characteristics of the process used by large companies in Spain to measure and evaluate their social media communication and public relations programs and campaigns. Specifically, three research objectives are considered: (O1) To determine whether the corporate communications functions under study have a strategic social media plan with measurable objectives; (O2) To identify whether social media communication actions are being evaluated and when this evaluation planning takes place; (O3) To establish the uses and purposes of social media measurement and evaluation by the departments under study.

This research, in addition to being one of the few studies that offers empirical evidence on how large organizations in Spain are adapting their measurement and evaluation practices in communication and public relations to the online environment, identifies the main challenges in this area.

1.1. The Evaluation of Communication and Public Relations Campaigns on Social Networks

Evaluation is an activity intrinsically linked to research (Gregory & Watson, 2008; Smith & White, 2021; Watson & Noble, 2014; Weiner, 2021), understood as the application of scientific methods aimed at solving specific problems (Noble, 2014). From this perspective, evaluation in public relations is based on the controlled, objective, and systematic collection of information, with the purpose of describing and understanding different communication phenomena (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Buhmann & Volk, 2022).

In the analysis of communication and public relations campaigns, evaluation can be conducted both at the end of a campaign, to assess the achievement of the proposed objectives, and during its execution, to obtain feedback and facilitate monitoring and continuous improvement of the process (Watson & Noble, 2014; Gregory, 2014; Silverman & Smith, 2024). Evaluation also provides information to guide the planning and design of future communication projects (Macnamara, 2025). This implies that, without evaluation, communication and public relations campaigns could not have a strategic role (Grunig, 2006), making evaluation the “cornerstone of strategic communication” (Buhmann & Volk, 2022, p. 475).

If evaluation consists of verifying that the proposed objectives have been achieved, it could be concluded that evaluation begins at the planning stage, by defining the objectives with evaluation in mind (AMEC & IPR, 2010; Noble, 2014). This means that one should not wait until the public relations program or campaign has

ended to determine how it will be evaluated (Lindenmann, 1993; Marca Frances, 2011; Gregory, 2014). This also applies to social media, where public relations activity should be evaluated through the lens of the objectives (Paine, 2011; CIPR, 2013; Volk & Buhmann, 2023), integrated with the overall communication/public relations strategy (Cuenca- Fontbona). et al., 2022).

The SMART goals concept, originally formulated by Doran (1981) in the field of management and later adopted in communication and public relations (e.g., Gregory, 2010; Xifra, 2014; ADECEC, 2018), underscores the need to define specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-limited goals, including in the case of social media communication (e.g., Phillips & Young, 2009; Paine, 2011; CIPR, 2013). This implies that the evaluation process must be strategic, linked to objectives, provide feedback, be reported, and be integrated with the organization (Cutlip et al., 2006; Luttrell & Capizzo, 2025).

Several recent studies have delved into measurement and evaluation practices in social media (Fitzpatrick & Weissman, 2021; Buhmann & Volk, 2022; Macnamara, 2023; Volk & Buhmann, 2023). These works agree that social network analysis is an important but underutilized resource in public relations and strategic communication, and that there is a tendency to focus measurement on activity indicators rather than on metrics of organizational impact. Studies applied in different contexts (O'Neil et al., 2023; Economou et al., 2023) have shown that, despite methodological advances, shortcomings persist in defining objectives and in linking evaluation with strategic planning.

1.2. The Potential of Data Obtained from Social Networks: Beyond Measuring Effectiveness

In recent years, the literature has highlighted the transition towards evidence-based strategic communication models (data-driven public relations), in which measurement and evaluation are integrated as essential components of decision-making (Volk & Buhmann, 2023; Economou et al., 2023). This perspective is framed within the theory of strategic communication, which conceives the communicative function as a planned, deliberate and measurable process oriented towards the achievement of organizational objectives (Grunig, 2006).

Evaluation should not focus solely on measuring desired outcomes, but also on other types of knowledge and strategic contributions (Weiner & Kochhar, 2016; Wiencierz & Röttger, 2019). Previous research indicates that social media data is used in public relations primarily for issue management and crisis prevention and control (Wiencierz & Röttger, 2019; Fitzpatrick & Weissman, 2021), while other uses, such as industry intelligence, competitor analysis, trend detection, and innovation support, appear to be underutilized (CIPR, 2011; Buhmann et al., 2018). This intelligence approach in public relations highlights the need for strategic information, analytical perspectives and anticipatory approaches through analytical and intelligence capabilities for decision-making in the field of communication and public relations management (Arcos, 2016).

In the era of digital media and information, the amount of data available for this type of measurement is greater than ever (Economou et al., 2023). Thanks to the volume of data generated daily and in real time through the internet and social media, it is possible to gather more and more precise information on aspects such as audiences, the issues and problems that the organization needs to address, crisis prevention and management, and monitoring of the sector and the competition (Weiner & Kochhar, 2016; Tam & Kim, 2019; Wiencierz & Röttger, 2019; DIRCOM, 2021; Fitzpatrick & Weissman, 2021; Macnamara, 2024).

Social media analytics and monitoring have emerged as a competitive intelligence resource, enabling improved performance and contributing to the effectiveness and efficiency of strategies (Weiner & Kochhar, 2016; Macnamara, 2024). Public relations professionals responsible for social media measurement can play a unique role within organizations, reporting to and advising their superiors and senior executives in a more meaningful way (Luo et al., 2015; Wiesenberg et al., 2017). Measurement and evaluation as a constant

process are gaining prominence (Watson & Noble, 2014), and offer the possibility of strengthening the strategic role of public relations in organizations (Zerfass & Volk, 2018; ADECEC, 2018; USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, 2019; Fitzpatrick & Weissman, 2021; O'Neil et al., 2023).

Data from social media is increasingly considered a core organizational asset (Holsapple et al., 2018), so if communication and public relations professionals do not understand and exploit the value of knowledge derived from social media measurements, they risk losing ground to other organizational functions (Wiesenberg et al., 2017; Macnamara, 2023).

2. OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of professional practices in social media measurement and evaluation, focusing specifically on the communication and public relations functions of large companies in Spain, and, more specifically, those listed on the Spanish stock exchange with their registered offices in Spain. To this end, the research focuses on examining the characteristics of the measurement and evaluation process carried out by this group of companies on social media. This general objective is achieved through the following specific objectives:

- O1: To analyze whether the corporate communication functions under study have a strategic plan in social networks with measurable objectives.
- O2: To identify the existence of evaluation of communication actions on social networks and the moment in which the planning of that evaluation is carried out.
- O3: Establish the uses and purposes of measurement and evaluation in social networks by the departments under study.

The group of organizations under study comprises all companies with registered offices in Spain that are listed on the Spanish stock exchange. According to data provided by the Madrid Stock Exchange (n.d.) on the date the study was defined (February 24, 2021), this group included a total of 125 companies, grouped into 7 main sectors.

The selection criteria for this group of companies are based on their status as large corporations, characterized by high revenue and strong financial standing. The breadth of the market in which they operate, the diversity of stakeholders with whom they interact daily, and the far-reaching impact of their decisions make this study particularly relevant. Its importance is further reinforced by the legal obligation to report any material event in Spain to the Spanish National Securities Market Commission.

3. METHODOLOGY

To answer the research objectives, a mixed methodology was designed based on conducting in-depth interviews and surveys, applied to communication and public relations professionals who identified themselves as workers in the field of measurement and evaluation in social networks within the public relations/corporate communication function of the companies under study. While the qualitative phase of the in-depth interviews was designed to provide richness and deep understanding of the subject of study, and to guide the design of the survey, the survey stage was intended to extend the research, providing concrete data to answer the research objectives, and to contrast the findings made through the in-depth interviews.

As shown in Table 1, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with professionals from 11 companies, 9 of which were listed on the IBEX-35 at the time the study population was defined. The selection of cases, which were not statistically representative, was based on two main criteria: (a) the interviewee's relevance to social media measurement and evaluation within their communication functions; and (b) the accessibility and availability of the participants. An effort was made to conduct at least one interview for each of the six core sectors into which the organizations comprising the study population are grouped. Most of the interviewees held positions as Director of Corporate Communications/Reputation or Director of Digital Communications.

The interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half (the shortest was 54 minutes and the longest was 2 hours and 22 minutes), although off the record, the conversation went on significantly longer in most cases, allowing for greater depth and openness regarding the topics discussed. The interviews were conducted in person in most cases (10 out of 15) and by telephone in cases where this was not possible. The script was structured into three thematic blocks: Strategic planning on social media, uses of measurement and evaluation on social media, and the aims and purposes of measurement and evaluation on social media. All sessions were transcribed and analyzed using manual thematic coding.

Table 1. *In-Depth Interview. Sample Characteristics*

Sector	Subsector	Company	Professional interviewed	Position
Basic Materials, Industry and Construction	Construction	Company 1	Informant 1	Director of Communications
			Informant 2	Head/Director of Digital Communication
		Company 2	Informant 3	Director of Communications
		Company 3	Informant 4	Head/Director of Digital Communication
Consumer Services	Highways and Parking	Company 4	Informant 5	Director of Communication and Head/Director of Digital Communication
Financial and Real Estate Services	Banks and Savings Banks	Company 5	Informant 6	Director of Communications
			Informant 7	Head of Corporate Reputation
		Company 6	Informant 8	Head/Director of Digital Communication
		Company 7	Informant 9	Director of Communications
	Insurance	Company 8	Informant 10	Director of Internal Communication and Head/Director of Digital Communication
			Informant 11	Head of Digital Analytics
			Informant 12	Head of Digital Analytics
Technology and Telecommunications	Electronics and Software	Company 9	Informant 13	Director of Communication and Head/Director of Digital Communication
Oil and Energy	Electricity and Gas	Company 10	Informant 14	Head/Director of Digital Communication
		Company 11	Informant 15	Director of Corporate Reputation

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Regarding the survey, a non-probability sampling method was used, employing a self-administered online questionnaire. Companies that chose to participate were notified. From April 29 to May 31, 2021, an email invitation was sent to all companies included in the study population. Two reminders were sent, resulting in a total of 46 valid questionnaires at the survey's close, representing 36.8% of the target population. Given the non-probability sampling method, the results are presented for descriptive purposes and should be interpreted with caution regarding generalizability.

As shown in Table 2, the majority of the companies represented in the sample (N=46) are large: over 70% (n=33) have more than 1,000 employees. Furthermore, 39.13% (n=18) of the responses correspond to companies listed on the IBEX-35, representing 18 of the 35 companies that make up this stock market index (51.42%). Data were also collected from companies belonging to all sectors included in the study.

Regarding the profile of the respondents, the gender distribution is balanced, with 50% women (n=23) and 50% men (n=23). The majority of the sample falls within the 40-49 age group (n=18, 39.1%) and the 30-39 age group (n=16, 34.8%). Almost two-thirds of the participants (n=30, 65.2%) belong to their company's "Communication Department," while the rest are distributed among the "Marketing Department" (n=7, 15.2%), the "Business Development Department" (n=3, 6.5%), "Other" (n=3, 6.5%), and the "Human Resources Department" (n=2, 4.4%). In terms of positions, 23.9% (n=11) hold the position of "Director of Communication", followed by "Head of Digital Communication" (n=9, 19.6%), "Head of Communication" (n=7, 15.2%), "Head of Digital Communication" (n=6, 13.0%), "Director of Marketing" (n=6, 13.0%) and "Other" (n=5, 10.9%).

The questionnaire was designed in accordance with the research objectives and based on a review of the existing literature and the results of in-depth interviews. Based on this, a set of questions was established, divided into three sections: (1) Strategic planning in social media with measurable objectives (Objective 1, 2 questions); (2) Existence of evaluation of communication actions in social media and when it is planned (Objective 2, 2 questions); and (3) Uses and purposes of measurement and evaluation in social media (Objective 3, 2 questions). The questionnaire was reviewed by four academic experts before its distribution to ensure the clarity and validity of the items.

Table 2. *Survey. Sample Characteristics*

VARIABLES	TOTAL SAMPLE (N=46)		VARIABLES	TOTAL SAMPLE (N=46)	
GENDER			**SUB-SECTOR**		
Women	50.0 %	(23)	Pharmaceutical and Biotechnology Products	10.6 %	(5)
Man	50.0 %	(23)	Banks and savings banks	10.6 %	(5)
AGE			Manufacturing and assembly of capital goods	8.8 %	(4)
Between 40 and 49	39.1 %	(18)	Real estate agencies and others	8.8 %	(4)
Between 30 and 39	34.8 %	(16)	Telecommunications and others	8.8 %	(4)
More than 50	15.2 %	(7)	Construction	6.5 %	(3)
Under 29	10.9 %	(5)	Engineering and others	6.5 %	(3)
POST			Food and drinks	6.5 %	(3)
Dir. of Communication	23.9 %	(11)	Electricity and gas	4.4 %	(2)
Head of Digital Communication	19.6 %	(9)	Media and Advertising.	4.4 %	(2)
Head of Communication	15.2 %	(7)	Other services	4.4 %	(2)
Dir. of Marketing	13.0 %	(6)	Minerals, Metals and Processing	2.2 %	(1)
Head of Social Media Communication	13.0 %	(6)	Construction Materials	2.2 %	(1)
Others	10.9 %	(5)	Chemical industry	2.2 %	(1)
DK/NA	4.4 %	(2)	Textiles, clothing and footwear	2.2 %	(1)
DEPARTMENT			Leisure, Tourism, and Hotel Industry	2.2 %	(1)
Communication Department	65.2 %	(30)	Trade	2.2 %	(1)
Marketing Department	15.2 %	(7)	Transportation and Distribution	2.2 %	(1)
Business Development Department	6.5 %	(3)	SOCIMI[1]	2.2 %	(1)
Others	6.5 %	(3)	Electronics and software	2.2 %	(1)
HR Department	4.4 %	(2)	**COMPANY SIZE**		
NS/NC	2.2 %	(1)	More than 1000	71.6 %	(33)
SECTOR			Between 251 and 1000	13.0 %	(6)
Basic Materials, Industry and Construction	28.1 %	(13)	Between 51 and 250	8.8 %	(4)
Consumer goods	19.6 %	(9)	Between 11 and 50	4.4 %	(2)
Consumer Services	15.2 %	(7)	Less than 10	2.2 %	(1)
Financial Services	10.9 %	(5)	**BELONGS TO IBEX 35**		

[1] REIT: Real Estate Investment Trust

Technology and telecommunications	10.9 %	(5)	No	60.86 %	(28)
Real Estate Services	10.9 %	(5)	Yes	39.13 %	(18)
Oil and Energy	4.4 %	(2)			

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Although data collection took place in 2021, this period is particularly relevant as it coincides with a phase of consolidation of corporate digital strategies and a boom in digital analytics. The aim of this study is not to offer an immediate description of the current state of the phenomenon, but rather to identify structural patterns and benchmark practices that allows the understanding of the evolution of communication and public relations functions in the digital environment. In this sense, the results constitute a useful empirical basis for future longitudinal comparisons and evolutionary analyses of measurement and evaluation practices in social media.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Strategic Planning in Social Networks with Measurable Objectives (O1)

During in-depth interviews, informants admitted that their companies began establishing a presence and opening profiles on social media indiscriminately and without any strategic criteria: "Until 2015, we generally had many profiles: profiles without objectives, profiles without a strategy, profiles that were no longer being managed, profiles where an IT specialist would upload things just to keep them active… and there was no specific objective" (Insurance Subsector, Company 8, Informant 10). However, little by little, these companies have begun to reflect on their presence on these channels from a strategic point of view, with most stating that they have a strategic social media plan.

These data were subsequently corroborated through the survey, in which 86.8% (n=37) of professionals stated that their companies "Do" have a strategic social media plan. Of these, 76.0% (n=35) reported having this plan documented, while the remaining 10.8% (n=5) stated that they do not have it documented despite having one. Additionally, 4.3% (n=2) indicated that, although a plan does not yet exist, it is being considered, and the remaining 8.7% (n=4) have not even undertaken any social media communication activities in the last year (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Frequency Table. Question (Item): Does Your Company Have a Strategic Plan for the Communication and Public Relations Actions It is Carrying Out on Social Networks? General Results (N=46).*

Answers	Absolute Freq.	Cumulative Abs. Freq.	Relative Frequency	Cumulative Relative Frequency
It doesn't exist.	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
Not yet, but it's being considered	2	2	4.3%	4.3%
Yes, but not in a document.	5	7	10.8%	15.1%
Yes, it's documented.	35	42	76.0%	91.1%
No actions are taken on social media.	4	46	8.7%	100.0%
DK/NA	0	46	0.0%	100.0%

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Regarding the existence of measurable objectives in social media, the majority of surveyed companies stated that they do have established objectives for social media (91.3%, n=42). However, as can be seen in Table 4, in approximately half of the cases consulted, these objectives do not meet the desirable SMART characteristics previously outlined in the literature, and around a quarter of these have not established specific objectives for all the social media platforms on which they carry out communication and public relations activities.

Table 4. *Frequency Table. Question (Item): Regarding the Objectives of These Communication and Public Relations Actions on Social Networks, Which of the Following Statements Do You Agree With? General Results (N=46).*

	Answers	Absolute Freq.	Cumulative Abs. Freq.	Relative Frequency	Cumulative Relative Frequency
We do not have established goals for social media.	Yes	4	4	8.7%	8.7%
	No	42	46	91.3%	100.0%
The objectives in social networks are generic and global in nature.	Yes	20	20	43.5%	43.5%
	No	22	42	47.8%	91.3%
	No actions are taken on social media.	4	46	8.7%	100.0%
Social media goals have a set timeframe.	Yes	22	22	47.8%	47.8%
	No	20	42	43.5%	91.3%
	No actions are taken on social media.	4	46	8.7%	100.0%
Social media goals specify key audiences to reach.	Yes	22	22	47.8%	47.8%
	No	20	42	43.5%	91.3%
	No actions are taken on social media.	4	46	8.7%	100.0%
Some social networks where we carry out actions do not have specific objectives established.	Yes	10	10	21.7%	21.7%
	No	32	42	69.6%	91.3%
	No actions are taken on social media.	4	46	8.7%	100.0%

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In line with these results, all the people interviewed stated that they had established objectives for social networks, although a large part of them were not able to verbalize what those objectives were explicitly (they offered vague and very brief descriptions), which could denote the existence of a lack of technical knowledge in this area, or that social networks are not truly managed based on objectives.

Some of the interviewees also admitted to the existence of social media actions not linked to objectives, and stated that, even today, many companies simply publish press releases or other types of content on social media in a haphazard way and without any strategic connection. One of the interviewees alluded to the reactive nature of the communication function to explain the lack of connection between communication actions and objectives:

> When planning communication actions, nobody is thinking about the final objective, but rather about the action itself, the execution of the action […] Here, in communication, the idea that the budget must serve to achieve certain objectives has not usually been considered […]because every minute, decisions are being made at the operational level that are not usually the result of careful consideration but are generally the result of a reaction, or because a decision has been made by someone higher up and must be carried out. (Electricity and Gas Subsector, Company 11, Informant 15).

4.2. Existence of Evaluation of Communication Actions on Social Networks and the Moment in Which It Is Planned (O2)

Based on the results obtained in both the survey and the in-depth interviews, it can be seen that most of the companies consulted do evaluate the actions they are taking on social media.

In the survey, almost three-quarters (71.7%, n=33) of respondents indicated that they had evaluated their social media communication and public relations efforts in the past year. Furthermore, 13.0% (n=6) reported that this evaluation had not yet been carried out, but was under consideration. Therefore, combining both responses, 84.7% (n=39) of the companies studied either evaluated or were considering evaluating their social media communication and public relations efforts. Only 6.5% (n=3) had neither evaluated nor considered such efforts, and the remaining 8.7% (n=4) had not even undertaken any social media actions in the past year (see Table 5).

Table 5. *Frequency Table. Question (Item): In the Last Year, Have the Communication and Public Relations Actions Carried Out on Social Networks Been Evaluated in Your Company? General Results (N=46).*

Answers	Absolute Freq.	Cumulative Abs. Freq.	Relative Frequency	Cumulative Relative Frequency
Yes.	33	33	71.7%	71.7%
No, but it's being considered.	6	39	13.0%	84.7%
No, and it hasn't been considered yet.	3	42	6.5%	91.2%
No actions are taken on social media.	4	46	8.7%	100.0%
DK/NA	0	46	0.0%	100.0%

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

With regard to when companies propose or plan this evaluation on social media (Table 6), it is observed that in most companies (n=22, 47.8%), the evaluation is planned when the objectives of the communication and public relations program or campaign are established. Approximately 1 in 5 companies (n=8, 17.4%) plans the evaluation during the implementation of the program or campaign, and in only 6.5% (n=3) of the observations collected does the respondent state that the evaluation is planned once the public relations and communications program or campaign has been completed.

Table 6. *Frequency Table. Question (Item): At What Point in the Communication Program or Campaign Is This Evaluation Planned or Proposed on Social Networks? (Single Answer Question) General Results (N=46).*

Answers	Absolute Freq.	Cumulative Abs. Freq.	Relative Frequency	Cumulative Relative Frequency
1	3	3	6.5%	6.5%
2	8	11	17.4%	23.9%
3	22	33	47.8%	71.7%
4	0	33	0.0%	71.7%
5	9	42	19.6%	91.3%
6	4	46	8.7%	100.0%

1. The evaluation is planned after the communication program or campaign has ended. 2. The evaluation is planned during the implementation of the communication program or campaign. 3. The evaluation is planned when the objectives of the communication program or campaign are established. 4. DK/NA. 5. No evaluation. 6. No social media activities.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

4.3. Uses and Purposes of Measurement and Evaluation in Social Networks (O3)

In addition to using social media measurement to evaluate the effectiveness of communication and public relations actions, the companies under study were asked about other types of uses of social media measurement.

The majority of those interviewed in depth admitted that the primary use of social media analytics is active listening through keywords for proactive issue management or early detection and management of potential crises. However, a large proportion of those interviewed also acknowledged the use and importance of social media analytics for both optimizing and planning strategies.

> "So the entire strategy we follow—whether on the website, the blog, or social media—is based on the results we see in our analytics. […] Because, at the end of the day, social media can't be the be-all and end-all; there are things that worked for you last year but don't work for you now." (Construction Subsector, Company 1, Informant 2).

The people interviewed also indicated some more concrete and innovative uses, although very few companies actually apply them: the selection of topics to be addressed in publications or campaigns, through the measurement of the interest generated by the topics of previous publications, or based on the detection of hot topics in the sector or in society in general; the identification and selection of influencers or micro-influencers; the adaptation of content based on the analysis of the personality of the audiences; or the selection of topics and content through the prediction of future trends.

The survey results indicate that approximately half of the companies consulted stated they are not currently conducting any type of social media measurement for the different uses presented in the questionnaire (see Table 7). However, the outlook appears positive, as the data improves considerably when the percentages of companies "currently conducting" measurement are combined with those "considering implementing" it.

The most widely adopted type of measurement among companies is that intended for monitoring the competition, with 52.2% (n=24) currently carrying it out, 19.6% (n=9) thinking about implementing it and 28.2% (n=13) not currently carrying it out and not having considered it.

Secondly, there are social media metrics used for strategy development (audience segmentation, topic selection, etc.), with 50.0% (n=23) of companies currently using this type of measurement. However, if these figures are added to those of companies considering implementing it (n=16, 34.8%), the cumulative positive percentage (n=39, 84.8%) is higher than the cumulative positive percentage for the other types of metrics.

Only 13.0% (n=6) report not using metrics for strategy development and have not even considered it. Therefore, it could be said that most companies believe that the greatest effort is needed in social media metrics, both those currently used and those that should be implemented, when it comes to strategy development.

Third, social media metrics used to detect industry trends and those used to manage issues show very similar percentages. In the first case, 45.6% (n=21) report currently using these metrics, with 28.2% (n=13) considering implementing them; and in the second case, 47.8% (n=22) report currently using them, and 23.9% (n=11) are considering implementing them.

Interestingly, the type of social media measurement that receives the most negative results is that intended for crisis detection and management (although, as mentioned above, the percentages obtained are similar for all types of measurements). This somewhat contradicts the results obtained in the qualitative phase of the in-depth interviews and the literature review, which pointed to the preferred use of measurements for this purpose. Adding together the companies that are currently carrying out this type of measurement (n=21, 45.6%) with those that say they are considering implementing it (n=7, 15.2%), we obtain a total of only 60.8% (n=28) of positive responses, compared to 32.6% (n=15) of companies that state they are neither carrying it out nor have they considered it.

Table 7. *Frequency Table. Question (Item): Beyond the Measurements Carried Out to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Communication and Public Relations Actions on Social Networks, Has Your Company Carried Out in the Last Year or Does It Plan to Implement Any Other Type of Measurement on Social Networks? General Results (N=46).*

	Answers	Absolute Freq.	Cumulative Abs. Freq.	Relative Frequency	Cumulative Relative Frequency
Social media metrics for crisis detection and management.	Currently carrying out	21	21	45.6%	45.6%
	Thinking about implementing	7	28	15.2%	60.8%
	It is not being done and has not been considered	15	43	32.6%	93.4%
	Doesn't know/No answer	3	46	6.5%	100.0%
Social media metrics to manage issues or topics.	Currently carrying out	22	22	47.8%	47.8%
	Thinking about implementing	11	33	23.9%	71.7%
	It is not being done and has not been considered	10	43	21.7%	93.4%
	Doesn't know/No answer	3	46	6.5%	100.0%
Social media metrics for strategy development (audience segmentation, topic selection, etc.)	Currently carrying out	23	23	50.0%	50.0%
	Thinking about implementing	16	39	34.8%	84.8%
	It is not being done and has not been considered	6	45	13.0%	97.8%
	Doesn't know/No answer	1	46	2.2%	100.0%
Social media metrics for competitor monitoring.	Currently carrying out	24	24	52.2%	52.2%
	Thinking about implementing	9	33	19.6%	71.8%
	It is not being done and has not been considered	13	46	28.2%	100.0%
	Doesn't know/No answer	0	46	0%	100.0%
Social media metrics for detecting trends in the sector.	Currently carrying out	21	21	45.6%	45.6%
	Thinking about implementing	13	34	28.2%	73.9%
	It is not being done and has not been considered	9	43	19.5%	93.5%
	Doesn't know/No answer	3	46	6.5%	100.0%

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Regarding the purposes for which the results of measurements and evaluations carried out on social media

are used (Table 8), the most frequent response was “To evaluate the effectiveness of the communication and public relations program or campaign,” with 78.3% (n=36). Following this, the next two most frequent uses are “To carry out future planning” and “To prepare reports and summaries,” with 67.4% (n=31) of the companies respectively stating that they do so.

It is noteworthy that only 58.7% (n=27) of the companies surveyed use data from social media measurements "To readjust the program or campaign", which is one of the main functions of evaluation in public relations programs or campaigns.

The percentage of companies that claim to use these results to provide information to other areas of the company or senior management is also low. Specifically, 56.5% (n=26) say they use them “to inform other areas of the company about the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of key stakeholders or society as a whole,” while only 28.3% (n=13) do so “to transmit *insights* or industry trends to other areas of the company.” Related to the above, only 45.6% (n=21) of the surveyed companies stated that they use the results of these measurements “to provide information to senior management for decision-making.”

On the other hand, approximately half of the surveyed companies stated that they use the results from social media metrics “to demonstrate the value of the communications function to senior management” (n=25, 54.4%), as well as “to convey an image of rigor and transparency of the communications function to senior management” (n=23, 50.0%). Finally, only 34.8% (n=16) use these results “to justify the investment in digital communications to senior management.”

Table 8. *Frequency Table. Question (Item): “What Are the Results of Measurements and Evaluations Carried Out on Social Networks Used For in Your Company? General Results (N=46).*

	Answers	Absolute Freq.	Cumulative Abs. Freq.	Relative Frequency	Cumulative Relative Frequency
To convey industry insights or trends to other areas of the company.	Yes	13	13	28.3%	28.3%
	No	33	46	71.7%	100.0%
To convey an image of rigor and transparency in the communication function to senior management.	Yes	23	23	50.0%	50.0%
	No	23	46	50.0%	100.0%
To make future plans.	Yes	31	31	67.4%	67.4%
	No	15	46	32.6%	100.0%
To readjust the program or campaign.	Yes	27	27	58.7%	58.7%
	No	19	46	41.3%	100.0%
To provide information to senior management for decision-making.	Yes	21	21	45.6%	45.6%
	No	25	46	54.4%	100.0%
To justify the investment in digital communication to senior management.	Yes	16	16	34.8%	34.8%
	No	30	46	65.2%	100.0%
To inform other areas about the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of key audiences or society.	Yes	26	26	56.5%	56.5%
	No	20	46	43.5%	100.0%
To evaluate the effectiveness of the program or campaign.	Yes	36	36	78.3%	78.3%
	No	10	46	21.7%	100.0%
To develop reports and memoranda.	Yes	31	31	67.4%	67.4%
	No	15	46	32.6%	100.0%
To demonstrate the value of the communication function to senior management.	Yes	25	25	54.4%	54.4%
	No	21	46	45.6%	100.0%

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

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5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research confirm that social media measurement and evaluation are still in an early stage of development within large Spanish companies. Although progress toward more planned and professional management is observed, social media continues to be treated in many cases as tactical tools rather than as strategic assets serving organizational objectives (Robson & James, 2013; Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017; Plowman & Wilson, 2018). This limited view is reflected in the persistence of poorly defined objectives or objectives not fully aligned with SMART criteria (Gregory, 2010; Xifra, 2014), and in the existence of actions disconnected from specific goals.

Evaluation on social media is the most common practice, but some cases persist—albeit limited— in which, despite carrying out communication activities on social media, no type of evaluation is performed on these platforms. Likewise, in some organizations, the planning of this evaluation is not addressed from the beginning of the program or campaign, which confirms that it is still an area in the process of consolidation.

The data also shows that companies are not fully exploiting the strategic potential of social media metrics. Their use is predominantly for evaluating campaign effectiveness and managing crises or *issues,* confirming a trend already noted in previous studies (Jiang et al., 2016; Zerfass & Volk, 2018; Fitzpatrick & Weissman, 2021), while applications geared towards competitive intelligence, trend detection, or decision support (Weiner & Kochhar, 2016; Wiencierz & Röttger, 2019; Economou et al., 2023) are still in their infancy. This implies a loss of potential value for organizations and reinforces the perception of measurement as an instrumental rather than a strategic task (Luo et al., 2015; Wiesenberg et al., 2017).

The results obtained show that a large proportion of the corporate communications and public relations functions surveyed are still not fully exploiting the potential of social media data. The lack of strategic focus on social media data is evident in many of the cases analyzed, as is the loss of value derived from this type of data, both for the corporate communications and public relations function and for other areas of the company. The results reveal a gap between professional discourse on the relevance of measurement and its actual application. This gap appears to be associated with deficiencies in data analytics training, a weak evaluative culture within organizations, and fragmentation between departments (Buhmann & Volk, 2022; Fitzpatrick & Weissman, 2021; Macnamara, 2023). These limitations hinder the adoption of a truly data- driven approach in public relations and strategic communications, in line with the conclusions of Economou et al. (2023), which highlight the weight of institutional and regulatory pressures on the slow incorporation of consolidated analytical practices.

Despite the progress observed, the professionalization of measurement and evaluation in social media remains a challenge (Fitzpatrick & Weissman, 2021). As stated by Media Intelligence Director at Rebold, Jesús Belmez, the sector is gradually recognizing the value of measurement, although the adoption of these practices is slow (Corporate Excellence, 2019). This situation is not exclusive to the digital environment but constitutes a structural phenomenon in the field of public relations, where evaluation has historically been a weak area, as demonstrated by Macnamara (2023). Evidence of this is that the main professional associations continue to promote documents and conceptual frameworks aimed at strengthening the evaluative culture (e.g., ADECEC, 2018), while agencies and technology providers remain in a phase of "evangelizing" the importance of measuring and analyzing communication results.

Inadequately evaluated corporate communication can compromise transparency and accountability to the public by hindering the identification of real impacts and the correction of ineffective strategies. The absence of consistent metrics not only limits communication effectiveness but can also erode trust in organizations, affecting their reputation and social legitimacy.

This work responds to the call from numerous authors for more empirical research on the professional

evaluation of communication and public relations in digital environments (e.g., Watson, 2008; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Fitzpatrick & Weissman, 2021). The findings identify structural gaps in large corporations in Spain, which continue to limit the maturity of measurement and evaluation in social media, even in large, well-resourced organizations. The value of this research lies in providing systematic empirical evidence that helps to understand why these limitations persist, thus contributing to the literature on the professionalization of strategic communication.

This study provides a benchmark overview of the state of social media measurement and evaluation in large Spanish companies, offering a valuable empirical foundation for both academic and professional fields. This knowledge allows for the identification of patterns, challenges, and opportunities for improvement that can guide both future research and organizational practice.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH

Among the main limitations of this study are the non-probabilistic nature of the sampling and the time frame of the data collected, which could affect the generalizability of the results. Likewise, participant self-selection may have introduced perceptual biases that limit the representativeness of the analyzed group. Future research should incorporate longitudinal or comparative methods to observe the evolution of measurement and evaluation practices, as well as explore differences across sectors and types of organizations. Another aspect of particular interest for future research is the analysis of the discrepancies detected between corporate headquarters and their subsidiaries, as the interviews revealed that the latter exhibit less mature practices in strategic planning and social media evaluation, despite having a digital presence. Delving deeper into the causes of this gap and the factors that could foster the improvement of these practices would constitute a valuable contribution to the literature and the field of organizational communication.

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Authors' Contributions

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AUTHORS

Paula Pineda-Martínez

University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU).

She holds a Doctorate in Social Communication from the UPV/EHU. She is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising at the same university, where she teaches courses on Strategic Communication and Public Relations. With more than a dozen publications in national and international journals, her research focuses on strategic communication and dialogue with audiences. She has participated in nationally and internationally funded research projects, including: the European research network "EU Kids Online" (CSO2013-47304-R; GIC12/63, IT858-13; GV14/20; GIC15/187), and the projects "Language Branding: Measuring the Brand of Minority Languages Using Artificial Intelligence and Neural Networks" (PID2022-1395370B-I00) and "Citizen Activism and Communication in the Face of Climate Change" (PID2023-147344OA-I00).

paula.pineda@ehu.eus

Index H: 8

Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2565-1390

Scopus ID: https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=57189600538

Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.com.tw/citations?user=LJBIF2wAAAAJ&hl=es

Academia.edu: https://independent.academia.edu/PaulaPinedaMartinez

Juan Carlos Miguel-de-Bustos

University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU).

He holds bachelor's degrees in Economics and Philosophy and a Doctorate in Communication Sciences. He also holds a Master's degree in Economics from the University of Grenoble. Since 1987, he has been a professor at the University of the Basque Country, where he teaches courses on the economic aspects of cultural industries. Since 2005, he has been a full professor in the Department of Audiovisual Communication. He has held the UNESCO Chair in Communication at the Universities of Grenoble and Lyon. He has contributed to several projects related to regional public television stations. He is currently participating in the Global Media & Internet Concentration Project (2021–2027). He has served as editor-in-chief of the communication journal ZER. He is a member of the UPV/EHU ADI Emerging Research Group, which focuses on the audiovisual industry, narratives, and gender(s).

jc.miguel@ehu.eus

Index H: 19

Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9507-7219

Scopus ID: https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=57191577742

Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=cvIGu7AAAAAJ&hl=en

Academia.edu: https://ehu.academia.edu/JuanCarlosMigueldeBustos

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