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# BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL PR COMPETENCIES - PERSONALISED NETWORKS OF INFLUENCE AS STRATEGIC RESOURCES FOR SUCCESSFUL PR ACTIVITIES

(to be considered for the IPR Award)

by

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**KEYWORDS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to look into Italian PR practitioners' opinions on whether or not specific social networks, the personalized networks of influence, are perceived to be as one of the main strategic resources and the degree of relevance they give to such networks. Personalised networks of influence are also tested with Italian journalists to verify whether or not other communication-related professions consider important to have personalised networks of influence and whether or not this relevance is perceived similar to that of PR practitioners. The data of this study was gleaned from a survey on PR practitioners and journalists' self-perceptions and perceptions of each others that was conducted in Italy from March to October 2007. The survey was based both on qualitative data collected through personal interviews with senior PR practitioners and journalists and on quantitative data gathered through an online, close-ended questionnaire. This study is based on the analysis of the survey data on personal influence.

**INTRODUCTION**

In recent years several scholars have turned their attention on studying the role of influence in public relations practices. It is recognized that, in order to fulfil its reflective and educational functions, public relations should not be regarded as a pure managerial activity. Yet, public relations in several countries are mostly considered in their organizational function and as such practitioners' main prerogative is to be able to become members of the dominant coalition (Daugherty 2001). In order to be part of the dominant coalition they must exercise influence and at the same time use influence tactics and strategies to help shape organizational choices, ideology, and practices (Reber & Berger 2006b). In this respect, the concept of influence and how PR practitioners can become influential with internal and external publics are key factors to be investigated. This question concerns not only how PR practitioners can be strategic and reflective in their actions but also who/what makes PR practitioners in the position to become strategic and at the same time reflective and why. Generally speaking it is frequently the organization, its CEO and managing directors that decided whether and to which extend involve communicators in managerial decisions. Several times the degree of influence and power held by PR practitioners are leading factors determining CEOs' decisions (Reber & Berger 2006a; Berger 2005). Yet, CEOs commonly expect top communicators to be media relations experts, hiring them primarily for their technical expertise (Grunig et al. 2002), while their managerial skills are requested in later stages, for instance when crisis situations happen.

In a long-lasting working relationship, public relations practitioners are often called to perform many other activities which require strategic thinking and good and powerful connections with diverse influential groups. Several studies in Asian countries have proved the importance for public relations practitioners of holding powerful and personalised networks of influence in order to be able to achieve their goals (Shin & Cameron 2003; Park & Luo 2001; Davies et al. 1995). As public relations is becoming more and more global, the role of influential networks is not anymore confined to specific geographical and cultural areas.

Currently, building influential networks is more a personal rather than an organizational prerogative, since influential networks are determined by face-to-face and trustworthy relationships. It is not purely acquirable by working for an organization. Having influential and powerful social networks is a personal skill that

top communicators are required to have. Are then public relations practitioners aware of the importance of holding influential networks for their career development?

The purpose of this study is to look into Italian PR practitioners' opinions on whether or not specific social networks, defined as personalized networks of influence, are important strategic resources for successful PR activities and for the development of own professional career. The concept of having personalised networks of influence is also tested with Italian journalists to verify whether or not other communication-related professions consider important for their professional activities to retain personalised networks of influence. It was decided to include this control sample because journalists are one of the main influential publics for Italian public relations and at the same time journalism has still a major role in many Italian communication jobs[1].

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The term "personalised network of influence" was created in response to the necessity to explain with a specific term a phenomenon that is largely expanding within public relations practices. The phenomenon under discussion concerns the increasing relevance that personal and customised interactions between PR practitioners and their influential publics, including internal and managerial relationships, have on personal and professional development and on the overall organization's performance. A personalised network of influence is a type of social network whose influence is exercised on a specific network of publics. The influence is personalized because it is obtained through continuous and exclusive face-to-face interactions between one individual upon another. The focus is thus on the members of the network, on their

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[1] Many journalists are working outside the traditional media organizations in situations that are commonly PR fields. For example, communication officers in public institutions are generally journalists. According to the law n.150/2000, recognising the role of communication as a strategic task for the Italian public sector, only members of the journalistic guild may access and work for the media relations departments in the Italian public sector. De facto this law has limited the possibility of PR officers to work in public sector, favouring the employment of journalists in PR positions.

personal relationships and each others understanding. Once interactions are established they become network relationships and to a certain degree even friendships.

The concept of personalized networks of influence should be regarded within the personal influence model as it is also conceived, together with other PR expertises, as the capacity to use personal relationships with strategic individuals to achieve public relations objectives. In this respect it is one of the major factors in PR professional's contribution to the organization. It is as well in a Bourdieuian perspective a social capital.

In "The Forms of Capital", Pierre Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes between three forms of capital: economic capital (money, property), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, educational qualifications) and social capital (connections, membership of a group). He defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 1983: 249). Bourdieu sees social capital as having two components: first, the size of the network that a person possesses, and, second, the volume of the capital that the other components of the network have, and to which a person obtains access through the network. Social capital is seen as a result of a conscious or unconscious investment strategy involving exchanges of, for instance, gifts, services, words, time, attention, care, or concern. It also implies obligations or credit. The members of the network can subjectively feel gratitude, respect, or friendship; the relationship can also be formalized in the form of legal rights and obligations.

This definition of social capital, which is also embraced by the term personalized networks of influence, is linked to the concept of g*uanxi*, a word that has a central conception in Chinese society. Guanxi describes a personal connection between two people in which one is able to prevail upon another to perform a favor or service, or be prevailed upon (Fan 2002). Guanxi can also be used to describe a network of contacts (Liu 1983), which an individual can call upon when something needs to be done, and through which he or she can exert influence on behalf of another (Gold 1985). In addition, guanxi can describe a state of general understanding between two people, where each person is aware of what the counterpart wants/needs and will take them into account when deciding the course of future actions (Jacob 1979).

Several studies on strategic managements, specifically of Asian culture, found that having guanxi networks, that is a sort of personalized networks of influence, is considered a sine qua non skill for successful PR practitioners and for good performance of companies. According to Shin and Cameron (2003) in South Korea great importance is given to the influence of informal relations on media relations activities, whereas the informal relations studied were characterized by typical guanxi relations. Moreover Park and Luo's study (2001) on Chinese firms draws attention to the importance of developing guanxi as a strategic mechanism to overcome competitive and resource disadvantages by cooperating and exchanging favors with competitive forces and government authorities. Guanxi is an important resource for individuals and organizations in China to induce cooperation and govern relationships efficiently as much as the idea of social capital is for Western cultures.

Studies on social capital in organizations are numerous and diversified, the majority of which are interested in dynamics of social networks (e.g. Newman 2006, Cross et al. 2006, Motion & Weaver 2005, Hazelton & Kennan 2000, Ibarra & Andrews 1993, McPherson et al. 1992, Coleman 1990). Social networks have been used to examine how organizations interact with each other, characterizing the many informal connections that link executives together, as well as associations and connections between individual employees at different organizations. A social network is a social structure made of nodes (which are generally individuals or organizations) that are tied by one or more specific types of interdependency, such as values, visions, idea, financial exchange, friends, kinship, dislike, conflict, trade, web links, etc. Networks provide ways for companies to gather information, deter competition, and collude in setting prices or policies. Research in a number of academic fields (Grunig 1992, Hatch 1997, Holtzhausen & Voto 2002, Reber & Berger 2006a) has shown that social networks operate on many levels, from families up to the level of nations, and play a critical role in determining the way problems are solved, organizations are run, and the degree to which individuals succeed in achieving their goals.

In order to reach specific goals individuals must possess a certain level of influence within their social networks. The level of influence is a closely related term with power. In fact, power is often described as a capacity, or something possessed, that allows one to get things done or get others to do what you want them to do while influence is the process through which power is actualised or realized (Pfeffer 1992). Influence is the use of power to get things done, or to accomplish something, for some

purpose in organizations (Kanter 1977, Mintzberg 1983). When power is exercised within a specific social network it is possible to talk about a personalised network of influence. According to Grunig (1992) those organizations which have excellent communication departments are those who have a senior communication manager as member of the dominant coalition, that is a PR practitioner that has obtained enough power to influence the organization overall performances and values. Possessing enough power to be accepted as member of the dominant coalition does not only translate into an increment in earnings (Broom 1982) and job satisfaction (Dozier 1981), but also it has positive effects on the organization and on the overall society (Grunig 1992). Yet, in order to acquire power, communication managers should be able to increase their internal and external influences. Berger and Reber (2006b) identified five types of influential resources: *individual influential resources, structural influential resources, relational influential resources, informational influential resources* and *systematic influential resources*. Individual influential resources include professional experiences and expertises, structural influential resources are determined by the hierarchical position within the organization, relational influential resources refer to the capacity to establish and maintain fruitful relationships with others inside and outside the organization, informational resources is the possibility to control the access to important information whereas systematic resources refer to professional organizations and associated codes and standards, established measures of professional value and reputation. Among the five influential resources great importance should be given to relational influential resources. While the other resources are important element for PR practitioners' careers, relational influence or the capacity to influence a personalised network of publics is regarded as determinant for becoming part of the organization's dominant coalition. Frequently power within organizations comes more from the degree to which an individual within a network is at the center of many relationships than actual job title. In public relations, practitioners holding personalized networks of influence can use them to reach personal and professional goals. The extent to which PR practitioners can count on the help and commitment of the members of their social networks is translated to the capacity of organizations, under which PR practitioners are working for, to fulfil their communicative and business interests. In these terms having extended personalized networks of influence is an asset for a career conscious PR.

**THE ITALIAN PR SITUATION**

Public relations in Italy, especially in last couple of years, are turning from an early to middle stage of development, if compared with the US and UK counterparts. Yet, there are still many differences within the territory, business sectors and local practices that makes difficult to precisely assess the status of the profession.

It is important to remind that the first activities that could be reconnected with public relations appeared to be performed during the Second World War. However, they were recognized as such only in recent times, when this profession started to grow and be accredited by different professional organizations. University programmes in public relations started only fifteen years ago, and in the last few years these programmes have seen a rise in enrolment. A recent estimation (Valentini & Muzi Falconi 2008) indicates that some 100,000 individuals operate in public relations in the public, private and non profit sectors of Italian society. This number is growing year by year, showing an increasing interest on this emerging field of work.

Regarding the practices, public relations in Italy is mostly conceived as a technical/ operative role. In some larger organizations the managerial role is sometimes present, whereas the strategic and reflective roles as well as the educational role are still at their infancy. In this respect media relations is one of the main activities of public relations and the capacity of communicators to be influential within the national and international media context is regarded as one of the most important skills. Whether communicators are working in-house or for an agency, clients and organizations frequently require that PR practitioners perform activities of media relations. Consequently clients and organizations evaluate the capacities of PR practitioners on the base of their professional skills as well as on their capacity to provide the most positive visibility of their organization or product or service in the media, which is translated with the capacity of using own personalized networks of influence with the journalists to reach specific goals.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study had both public relations practitioners and journalists assessed on their own and the other group's perceptions of the importance of having personalized networks of influence. It was believed that the two groups would exhibit different

perceptions on the importance of having personalized networks of influence, with different levels of agreements attributed to personalized networks of influence between practitioners and journalists.

The following hypotheses analyse the extent PR practitioners and journalists believe it is important to have personalized networks of influence for their professional activities and whether retaining personalized networks of influence is perceived as important in equally measure to both groups.

The first hypothesis is:

H1: Public relations practitioners and journalists will perceive differently the importance of having personalized networks of influence for their professional activities.

H1a: The perceived importance of having personalized networks of influence for professional activities will be greater for practitioners than for journalists.

H1b: The perceived importance of having personalized networks of influence for professional activities will be greater for journalists than for practitioners.

It was also decided to test whether PR practitioners-journalists relationships are perceived trustworthy and more important than journalist-media organization relationships in equally measure by both groups. For this test, it was predicted that public relations practitioners would evaluate more positively the importance of having trustworthy relationships with the journalists than journalists would do.

The second hypothesis is:

H2: Public relations practitioners and journalists will perceive that it is more important to have trustworthy relationships between practitioners and journalists than between journalists and their media organization or their editor

H2a: It is more important for public relations practitioners than journalists to establish trustworthy relationships between the two professions.

H2b: It is more important for journalists to establish trustworthy relationships with their media organization or editor than with public relations practitioners.

It was then tested whether one of the two group consider more significant to hold personalized networks of influence than other skills for their professional developments or whether both groups have similar opinions. It was predicted that both groups give more importance for their career perspective to have good professional skills rather than to have personalized networks of influence.

The third hypothesis is:

H3:  Specific professional skills are more important than having personalized networks of influence for public relations practitioners and journalists

H3a:  More public relations practitioners will perceive that it is more important to have specific professional skills than personalized networks of influence.

H3b:  More journalists will perceive that it is more important to have specific professional skills than personalized networks of influence.


**METHODOLOGIES**


The data of this study were gathered from a survey on PR practitioners and journalists' self-perceptions and perceptions of each others that was conducted in Italy in summer 2007. The survey was based both on qualitative data collected through personal interviews with 6 senior PR officers and 6 journalists and on quantitative data gathered through an online, closed answers questionnaire. The questionnaire, generated from the analysis of the personal interviews, was composed of 32 statements on 10 core issues and divided in 10 sections plus one introductory section where personal information about the respondent was collected. This study is based on the analysis of the survey data of the section on personal influence.

The questionnaire was thus put online from 15 June to 15 August 2007 and at the same time it was advertised on FERPI (Italian Federation of Public Relations) and FNSI (Italian National Press Federation) and in other online communication web pages. An invitation to complete the questionnaire was also sent via email to a journalist mailing list.

In order to have a high visibility within the Italian context a probability sampling with an open number of respondents was chosen. The sample was made of two groups, one

consisting in PR practitioners working at corporations, non-profit organizations, agencies and public institutions and the other made by journalists working at daily newspaper offices, broadcasting stations and wire services. Both groups have been given a similar questionnaire. This helped to assess to which extent the self-evaluation matches with the counter-part's evaluation. Respondents were asked to express their degree of agreement to each sentence through a seven-point Linkert-type scale, where 1 was strongly disagree with the statement and 7 strongly agree, and 0 represented don't know/no response.

For each response quantitative and comparative analyses was performed, that is, the responses were evaluated through tests of significance, t- test and Pearson's chi-square test, and according to their frequency per group of respondents and demographic characteristics.

At the end of the period 856 answers were collected, but only 562 were usable, of which 317 were from journalists and 245 were from PR practitioners.


**RESULTS**


The main characteristics of the respondents who completed the questionnaire can be summarised as follows: the average age of both groups was 30-40 years old. The majority of all respondents were male and have completed a higher degree in a university. Some differences in the proportions between the two groups were visible: more women (almost half of the sample) were PR practitioners than women as journalists (one third of all journalists), more journalists (36.5%) than PR practitioners (26.7%) obtained a university degree[2] while the rest of the sample had only a vocational training or a college degree. The majority of journalists who responded to the questionnaire had either 10-20 years of experience (30.95% ) or 20-30 years of experience (26.74%) while more than half (51.43%) of the PR sample had only 1-5 years of experience.

One determining factor that affects the establishment of influential networks is the individual capacity to create and transmit trust. Trust is also essential for those professions whose core activities imply interactions, cooperation and even support

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[2]     University degree refers either to a completed bachelor, master or doctorate degree.

from other individuals. When asked whether it was more important to have trustworthy relationships between PR practitioners and journalists than between journalists and their organization or editors, journalists showed to be rather neutral whereas PR practitioners granted a larger consent (Exhibit 1).

*Exhibit 1 - Trustworthy relationships between PR practitioners and journalists are more important than trustworthy relationships between journalists and their organization or editor.*

| Levels of agreements with the statement | Responses of Pr Practitioners in % | Responses of Journalists in % | Responses of all sample in % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 0% | 2% | 1% |
| Disagree | 10% | 12% | 11% |
| Disagree to some extent | 12% | 21% | 17% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 19% | 24% | 22% |
| Agree to some extent | 27% | 24% | 25% |
| Agree | 18% | 10% | 14% |
| Strongly agree | 13% | 7% | 10% |
| *Grand Total* | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Besides the expected results of PR practitioners' answers, which confirm the core role that media relations activities have within the Italian PR context, the responses of the Italian journalists point out a probable shift at the level of working relationships from the traditional role of media organizations as major partners for journalists' work towards a multi-partner model, where journalists find more important to have good relationships with other external significant partners.

The journalists interviewed in the qualitative round support the idea that their profession is getting more and more aware of the importance of PR activities for their daily work, and, as a result, they valued the possibility of having trustworthy relationships with them as a major element to obtain newsworthy feeds (Valentini & Muzi Falconi 2008).

Great importance was given by both groups on having established personalised network of influence for PR activities (Exhibit 2). It is evident that, as PR activities in Italy deal for about 60% with media relations, and thus clients and organizations value extended networks of influence as one of the main professional assets that PR practitioners should have in order to take care of client/organization's communication activities.

*Exhibit 2 - Many PR practitioners are chosen on the base of the quality and extension of their personal networks*

| Levels of agreements with the statement | Responses of Pr Practitioners in % | Responses of Journalists in % | Responses of all sample in % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 1% | 3% | 2% |
| Disagree | 1% | 2% | 2% |
| Disagree to some extent | 6% | 10% | 8% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 19% | 20% | 19% |
| Agree to some extent | 32% | 34% | 33% |
| Agree | 28% | 28% | 28% |
| Strongly agree | 13% | 4% | 8% |
| *Grand Total* | 100% | 100% | 100% |

However, PR practitioners do not believe that having personalised networks of influence is a prerogative of public relations: 14% of the PR sample disagreed and another 32% was slightly in disagreement with the idea that personal networks are more important for their profession than for journalism (Exhibit 3). On the other hand, the PR sample for 18% agreed to some extent and 15% agreed with this statement. It is not clear whether this fragmentation of PR responses could have be influenced by the fact that many PR practitioners had previously worked as journalists and thus their understanding on the value of having personalised networks of influence is more similar to those of journalists. For those who have been working primarily in PR sectors journalists are not specifically required to possess particular networks for effectively carrying out their work. The data of this study are not sufficient to confirm this correlation, but this appears probable, when cultural and contextual factors such as the development of PR profession in Italy and the importance of personal relationships in different Italian contexts[3], are taken into consideration.

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[3] The role of personal relationships and networking in Italy appears to have many similarities with the concept of guanxi in Asian countries. Orrù (1991) in his study on Taiwanese and Italian small-firms economies discovered that the two countries share many common business similarities including a common understanding of personal ties and business networks. Further support on the importance of personal relationships in Italy was given by the study of Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti (1993) on local government in Italy.

*Exhibit 3 - Personal networks are more important for PR practitioners than for journalists*

| Levels of agreements with the statement | Responses of Pr Practitioners in % | Responses of Journalists in % | Responses of all sample in % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 3% | 7% | 5% |
| Disagree | 14% | 24% | 20% |
| Disagree to some extent | 32% | 24% | 27% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 13% | 14% | 14% |
| Agree to some extent | 18% | 18% | 18% |
| Agree | 15% | 9% | 12% |
| Strongly agree | 4% | 4% | 4% |
| *Grand Total* | 100% | 100% | 100% |

When was asked whether many journalists are chosen on the base of the quality and extension of their personal networks, 35% of PR practitioners slightly disagreed on this statement while another 24% was neutral. Journalists' responses also situated between neutral (21%) and disagree to some extent (23%) stances (Exhibit 4). If compared to the statement on the selection of PR practitioners on the base of the quality and extension of their personal networks, the responses moderately turned toward the disagreement level, that is, both groups considered that having personal networks is a more important professional asset for the career of PR practitioners than for journalists.

*Exhibit 4 - Many journalists are chosen on the base of the quality and extension of their personal networks*

| Levels of agreements with the statement | Responses of Pr Practitioners in % | Responses of Journalists in % | Responses of all sample in % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 3% | 5% | 5% |
| Disagree | 9% | 14% | 12% |
| Disagree to some extent | 35% | 23% | 28% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 24% | 21% | 22% |
| Agree to some extent | 15% | 19% | 17% |
| Agree | 12% | 11% | 11% |
| Strongly agree | 2% | 6% | 5% |
| *Grand Total* | 100% | 100% | 100% |

The significance of having personalised networks of influence has been recognised by previous study (Reber & Berger 2006b, Park & Luo 2001, Davies et al. 1995) as one

of the important resources for career conscious PR practitioners. The larger is the level of the personalised networks of influence, the larger is the power that this person holds within the dominant coalition. However, the extend to which Italian PR practitioners perceive that their power is related to their influential networks is not automatically associated. When it was asked to assess whether specific professional skills are more important than personal networks, the majority of both samples strongly agreed with it: 38% of PR practitioners strongly agreed and another 36% agreed with this statement, whereas 35% of journalists strongly agreed, 24% agreed and another 25% agreed to some extent (Exhibit 5).

*Exhibit 5 - Personal networks are important, but specific professional skills are more important both for PR practitioner and for journalist.*

| Levels of agreements with the statement | Responses of Pr Practitioners in % | Responses of Journalists in % | Responses of all sample in % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 0% | 1% | 0% |
| Disagree | 0% | 1% | 0% |
| Disagree to some extent | 4% | 3% | 3% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 12% | 13% | 12% |
| Agree to some extent | 11% | 25% | 19% |
| Agree | 36% | 24% | 29% |
| Strongly agree | 38% | 35% | 36% |
| *Grand Total* | 100% | 100% | 100% |

It is not clear whether the awareness of the key role played by personalised networks of influence for an advancement in career will increase when the Italian PR context will move from a technical/operative type of activities towards a more strategic and reflective type. When this data was collected the majority of PR activities were related to the technical/operative function, including a great part of media relations. It is possible that in future, when Public Relations in Italy will be more focused on the strategic and reflective functions, PR practitioners will value more the capacity of establishing and maintaining personalised networks of influence.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study show no significant statistical differences in perceptions between the two groups (Exhibit 6). Both journalists and PR practitioners believe that

is important to have extended networks of influence in order to be able to properly perform their job, but more important are the professional skills. The level of agreements attributed to personalized networks of influence between practitioners and journalists was not exactly the same, but was not statistically relevant to strongly affirm that the two groups would have exhibited different perceptions.

*Exhibit 6. PR practitioners and journalists' opinion on the importance of personalised networks of influence – statistical tests*

| Statements about personalised networks of influence | PR practitioners | | Journalists | | t-tests | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *m* | *σ* | *m* | *σ* | *t* | *df* | *P* |
| Trustworthy relationships between PR practitioners and journalists are more important than trustworthy relationships between journalists and their organization or editor. | 4.707 | 1.493 | 4.148 | 1.474 | -2.850 | 232 | 0.005 |
| Many PR practitioners are chosen on the base of the quality and extension of their personal networks | 5.165 | 1.222 | 4.796 | 1.243 | -2.254 | 232 | 0.025 |
| Personal networks are more important for PR practitioners than for journalists | 3.907 | 1.535 | 3.583 | 1.610 | -1.553 | 234 | 0.122 |
| Many journalists are chosen on the base of the quality and extension of their personal networks | 3.811 | 1.339 | 3.950 | 1.579 | 0.706 | 233 | 0.481 |
| Personal networks are important, but specific professional skills are more important both for PR practitioner and for journalist. | 5.911 | 1.150 | 5.695 | 1.253 | -1.367 | 240 | 0.173 |
| Exhibit shows mean (m) scores (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree), their standard deviations (σ) and the results of t-test, t-value (t), degree of freedom (df), probability (p), which provides indication on whether or not the means of two groups are statistically different from each other. | | | | | | | |

Concerning the first hypothesis, the results disconfirm that public relations practitioners and journalists would have differently perceived the importance of having personalized networks of influence for their professional activities. Although both groups agreed on the high importance of holding personal networks of influence for PR practitioners, they also exhibit a common level of agreement on the relevance of personal networks for journalists. It could be argued that many journalists believe that they are chosen on the base of the quality and extension of their personal networks because many journalists in Italy are working outside their traditional professional fields and frequently they are in charge of media relations or public

communication activities for non media related private or public organizations. It appears that the large number of journalists who supported the importance of relational influential resources was determined by the fact that many journalists in Italy practice PR activities too.

For the second hypothesis, the responses dealing with the importance given to different relationships confirmed that both public relations practitioners and journalists perceive that it is more important to have trustworthy relationships between practitioners and journalists than between journalists and their organizations or editor. As several journalists are working outside their traditional domains, their relations with media organizations are diverse and not necessarily exclusive. Additionally, the pressure on media industry of the past twenty years that lead towards a more market-driven type of journalism, had some effects also in the PR industry (Curtin 1997). While journalists became more dependent on PR news feeds, they consider more important to have good and trustworthy personal relationships with communicators than with their media organizations or editors (PR 58%, Journalists 42%[4]).

Noticeably, PR practitioners, but not only, gave a certain relevance to the importance of personal trust between the two communicators rather than organization-journalist trustworthy relationships. Good relationships and trust are perceived to be more a personal than organizational resource. From an organizational perspective, this highlights the necessity to transform the question of personal trust between people into a structured and manageable organizational resource, where the concept of trust should be regarded as a resource with relevant organizational value.

With respect to the third hypothesis, the findings showed no statistically significant difference between the two groups in their answers. When asked to value how important personal networks are in relations to other professional skills in their daily work, a large percentage of respondents in both groups, although giving a good level of importance of personalised networks, believed that professional skills are much more important than holding personalized networks of influence. These findings

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[4]    Total percentage of both groups that value more important to have good and trustworthy relationships between journalists and PR practitioners calculated as the sum of percentages of 'agree to some extent', 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses.

corroborate the general unawareness, mostly of PR practitioners, of the significance that personalised networks of influence have on the final added value produced for private, public and social organizations they work for.

It is important to remind that the Italian PR context is mostly focused on operational/technical functions. Hence, it appears clear that public relations, if intended as the management of communication between an organization and its publics (Grunig and Hunt 1984), can not fulfil its role of managing when it is only meant to be operational and communicators are only asked to implement decisions made by others. It is even more straightforward to spot that there would be no specific interest in preferring a PR practitioner to a journalist if organizations require to their communicators purely to accomplish operative tasks, like for example, media relations. This would explain why so many journalists are hired in PR positions. Beside larger and more internationalised companies, the Italian context is mostly made of small and medium size firms, whose interests remained on operative and technical PR activities.

In this scenario it seemed necessary, before providing outputs on factors and resources required to empower PR practitioners and make them influential within the dominant coalition, to study the level of awareness that PR practitioners have about the importance of personalised networks of influence. It emerges that Italian communication manager have not yet fully understood that relationships can create access to powerful individuals or influential groups and lead to challenging and career-enhancing assignments, which are strategic and reflective in nature. The strategic and reflective nature of PR activities would allow them to distinguish their expertises from journalists, and consequently provide more legitimation to their profession. Also, agreement on who public relations experts are and what roles they play are essential in understanding their responsibilities to their organizations and society. In a Foucaultian way, if every relationship is to some extent a power relation, and we are surrounded by ongoing strategic relations (Foucault 1988), then what makes a difference is the extent and the level of influence that holders have on their relationships. Furthermore, in societies, whose cultures are characterised by strong family and communities' ties and are based on a strong sense of personal commitment towards the members, such as several Asian countries but also Italy, it is ranked as essential, beside expertises and professional experiences, the capacity to establish, maintain and have a substantial impact on personalised networks of influence.

## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

For its nature, this study has some limitations that should be clarified to gauge the values of the conclusions. The first limitation is the size of the sample. The probability sampling with an open number of respondents did not permit to control the typology and quantity of respondents, which was not balanced by the two groups. Additionally, it is estimated that in Italy there are approximately 70,000 registered journalists and approximately 100,000 PR practitioners. Thus the online sample represents 0.45% of all Italian journalists and 0.25% of all Italian PR practitioners. For a confidence level of 95% the number of valid responses should have been 380 for the journalists and 383 of for the PR practitioners. The level of confidence is slightly below the one proposed, with a precision level between 5-10%. Another limitation was the treatment of data obtained from another survey, which restricted the possibility to deeply investigate the personal influence theme.

Taking into consideration these limits, the value of this study is given by the possibility of identifying certain relevant trends on personal influence theme in the Italian context that can serve as a starting point for further research. In particular, little research is available on the personal influence theme in non-Anglo-Saxon countries. It would be then appropriate to study in other contextual settings the definitions that PR practitioners and other communication-related professions give to the concept of influence and power in relations to their career advancement and professional activities as well as to investigate what CEO and managing directors value as most important factors for allowing communication managers to become member of the dominant coalitions.

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