
How European public relations men and women perceive the impact of their professional activities

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Abstract

Starting from the theoretical perspective of gendered discourses, a secondary analysis of the data from the European Communication Monitors of 2008 and 2009, an annual survey about trends in the profession of public relations, was conducted on gender differences. The pilot study shows that female public relations professionals in most of Europe perceive their organisational influence to have less impact than those of men on the strategic decision making and planning of their organisations. Secondly, we found that female professionals value social media and social networks more than their male colleagues. Social media could therefore work to empower the female approach to the public relations profession.

Introduction

The profession of public relations has become a gendered profession. Since the 1980s, the field has been feminised all over the world as more and more women entered the profession. In the USA, 70 percent of the professionals are female (Aldoory & Toth, 2002), and researchers in other parts of the world have made similar estimates: for example in the Netherlands (Van Ruler & Elving, 2007), Germany (Bentele & Junghänel, 2004) and Sweden (Flodin, 2004). In the literature, aspects of this feminisation of the profession have been discussed, including the consequences of feminisation for the credibility of the profession, the power it holds in organisations, the position of female public relations professionals in organisations and the views women have on the communications profession.

A central issue for the type of gendered profession that public relations has become is

the question of the so-called power differential: the difference in power between men and women in management positions in organisations. Power and the perception of power are major explanations for the “chasm between women and men in management” (Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2001, p.102). Grunig et al. conclude that there is a cycle of powerlessness for women in management (see also Andsager & Hust, 2005; Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Toth, Serini, Wright, & Emig, 1998; Hon, 1995). Women are in a complex organisational situation where power is not only actual but also perceived (Kaplowitz, 1978). Sex-role stereotyping in a society makes people perceive women as less powerful or empowered than they actually are (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkranz, 1972), and this may even lead to a distortion of the self-perception of women in relation to their power in the organisation (Johnson, 1978). Thus gendered discourses could reinforce these perceptions and self-perceptions about women in public relations management positions.

These perceptions and self-perceptions could also influence the role public relations women are able to play in the so-called dominant coalition in the organisation. The dominant coalition is the “group of individuals within the organization who have the power to determine its mission and goals. They are the top managers who “run” the organization.” (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 141). Access to and support of this dominant coalition, or the senior management of the organisation, is important for the functioning of public relations professionals and departments. The Excellence study of Grunig et al. (2002) showed that women perceive less support for women in the organisation than men and that CEOs seem to have lower expectations about

the managerial competences of women when there are more women in management roles in public relations.

Gender differences in the perception of power and influence on senior management could also influence the way men and women perceive and use new information and communication technologies, such as emerging social media and social networks. In research on the adoption of new technologies, such as email, gender differences in the perception of these new technologies have been found (Gefen & Straub, 1997). On the more general level of the acceptance of technology Vankatesh and Morris (2000) have shown that although men and women have different perceptions of new technology, they do not differ much in how they use it. Not only are women more influenced by their perceptions of the use and ease of a new technology, they are also more influenced by the so-called subjective norm; in short, they behave how other people think women should behave in a certain situation, especially in the introduction phase of a new technology (Venkatesh & Morris, 2000). With regard to the rise of social media and social networks this could mean that male and female professionals have different perceptions of new information and communication technologies that might influence the implementation of social media in their daily practice in public relations. The area of social media could be one of the areas where gender differences will be most visible.

Empirical research into gender differences in the professional field of public relations is scarce, not only in the area of social media but also into broader questions like the perception of the influence of male and female professionals on senior management and possible consequences of the feminisation of the field. Questions like these on gender and the public relations profession tie in with theoretical positions of liberal feminism (Grunig et al., 2001). Liberal feminism theory, in short, departs from the position that gender systems should be minimised, that men and women are individualists, that there are unequal distributions of gender roles and that changes should be made within the existing social structures (Rakow & Nastasia, 2009).

Questions with regard to the power differential in organisations fit the liberal feminism theorist position well and so do questions about possible different perceptions men and women have about topics in the profession or their own position within the organisation. With regard to public relations professionals, these considerations lead to the following research questions about gender, public relations and the perception of social media and social networking:

RQ1 Do male and female public relations professionals have different perceptions about their influence on senior management?

RQ2 Do male and female public relations professionals have different perceptions about strategic decision making in the organisation?

RQ3 Do male and female public relations professionals have different perceptions about the importance of social media and social networks for public relations?

To explore possible answers to these research questions, we have performed a secondary analysis of the data from the European Communication Monitors of 2008 and 2009 (Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2008, 2009; Tench Verhoeven, & Zerfass, 2009; Moreno, Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2009; Moreno, Verhoeven, Tench, & Zerfass, 2010). The European Communication Monitors from 2007-2011 (Zerfass, Van Ruler, Rogojinaru, Verčič, & Hamrefors., 2007; Zerfass et al., 2008; 2009; 2010) are annual online surveys for communications and public relations professionals in joint-stock and private companies, governmental institutions, non-profit organisations and agencies in Europe. We consider this secondary analysis of the data from two monitors as a pilot study on the differences in perception of male and female public relations professionals in Europe.

Theoretical background

In 1992, Haslett, Geis and Carter (1992) presented the results of dozens of studies that demonstrated the negative effects of perceived gender differences. Today, the existence of differences between men and women in the

workplace prompted by discrimination is still a common perspective. Glick and Fiske (2002), for instance, carried out research with 15,000 men and women in 19 nations and found that both hostile sexism and benevolent sexism, which is favourable to women, assume that women are weaker and less competent than men. Hultin and Szulkin (2003) found that women in Sweden earned less in power structures populated more by men than women. Senior and Swailes (2010) have recently summarised explanations of why women, in spite of 'equal pay for equal work' legislation and much greater participation of women in educational systems, still earn less than men on average and why they still do not rise in similar proportions to higher levels in their profession despite achieving professional status. The reasons often mentioned to explain the relative lack of power of women in workplaces stress the prevailing structures and power balances in organisations, which are supposed to be predominantly based on the male model of organisations and management. However, this does not explain why these structures and power balances do not change.

Social structures and institutionally induced power balances enter the everyday social interaction between people, through communication. They are part of the actors' mindsets and actively mobilised in their communication with others in the form of 'summary representations' (Knorr-Cetina, 1988, p39). Such representations, then, are part of the wider discourses in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1974), where there is no reality or institutional structure independent of the words that are used to understand them. In other words, the world of objects and institutions are part of the discourse and constituted by it, making discourse broader than just linguistic expressions of actors (Woolgar, 1986) Thus, discourses and representations (especially those that are dominant in a certain setting) can be seen as an important mechanism through which both stability and room for manoeuvring are shaped. From a communication perspective, meaningful change is dependent on changes in discourses, representations and storylines that are

mobilised by interacting social actors (Leeuwis and Aarts, in press).

Starting from this perspective and assuming that structure is actively produced, reproduced and/or transformed in everyday communication, a theoretical framework has been developed for understanding the findings of our study by selecting three interconnected concepts. These concepts are 1) constructed realities, 2) interpretive communities and 3) gendered issues of public relations.

1. Constructed realities

This study takes a constructionist perspective. Instead of considering reality as existing 'out there', we assume that the reality we know is interpreted, constructed, enacted and maintained in, through and by conversations and discourse (Ford, 1999; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Watzlawick; 1984, Weick, 1995). Not only are conversations or discourses the processes through which realities are constructed, they are also the product of such construction. As Ford argues, conversations become reality (Ford, 1999, p. 485). The concept of framing makes sense here. When people in interactions frame an event or a phenomenon in their 'talk', they emphasise certain aspects, while other aspects are automatically pushed to the background (Entman, 1993; Aarts & Van Woerkum, 2006; Dewulf et al., 2009). By framing events, developments and/or phenomena in interaction, people try to achieve social ends and become active agents (Frake, 1977); they do something with reality. Out of innumerable possible descriptions, people choose specific descriptions of reality to accomplish goals through interactions in a specific context. Generally speaking, such goals have to do with influencing the content, the interaction-process and/or the relationship with the actor(s) involved (see Dewulf et al., 2009). Moreover, events and phenomena from differing contexts are connected to each other whether they are related or not. This is how we construe and define the world around us by means of communication. This leads to the rise of so-called interpretive communities around all kinds of topics. For example in the professional public relations community about the influence that public relations professionals have on

senior management, the strategic decision-making of the organisation and the usefulness of social media and social networks for public relations may be discussed differently within specific communities.

2. *Interpretive communities*

The concept of interpretive community was first coined by Fish who argued that an interpretive community is a group of like-minded individuals who share similar assumptions about how things should be understood (Fish, 1980). In Fish's words: "It is interpretive communities, rather than either text or reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features" (ibid, p. 14). It is in conversations that people construe stories about the world around them by connecting events and phenomena from different contexts, including how to interpret them. As Gergen (1985, p. 267) points out, "the terms by which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people". In other words, socialisation provides us with instructions on how to see the world.

Interpretive communities are also called speech or discourse communities, symbol-sharing communities and even communities of practice; these terms all refer to groups of people who might share understandings of ideas and language that would be different from other groups' understandings (Yanow, 1999). The process of symbolic convergence (Pepper, 1995) that characterises these communities results in inter-subjectivity and a shared reality. It is through everyday conversations that people achieve mutual understanding and establish interpretive communities, which form the basis of rationality (Habermas, 1981) and include dominant ideologies and power relationships within the wider society. In these communities, concepts of the self and the other are constructed, and public reason and opinion are formed (Kim & Kim, 2008). Thus, conversations within such interpretive communities fulfil an essential role in structuring relations, in organising who is in and who is out and in constructing shared perceptions about the rules of the game.

With regard to the research questions at stake here, we can rephrase our questions about

perceptions that public relations men and women have about their influence on senior management, their strategic impact in the organisation and the value of social media in terms of different interpretive communities in the public relations profession that could exist. Men and women may participate in different interpretive communities in which ideas related to women at work are validated and reproduced in different ways, which leads to the cycle of powerlessness for women in management as Grunig et al. (2001) noted (see also O'Neil, 2003).

3. *Gendered issues of public relations*

Research shows that men and women working in the domain of public relations have different perceptions and experiences with regard to several aspects of their profession (e.g. Grunig et al., 2001; Choy & Hon, 2002). To understand this difference, we use the theory of Deborah Tannen, an American sociolinguist, who tape-recorded and analysed numerous conversations for a better understanding of miscommunication between men and women (Tannen, 1990). Tannen claims that there are gender differences in ways of speaking. The starting point is acknowledging that people in interaction try to realise two universal needs: (1) the need to be connected to other people and (2) the need to be independent. These needs are not easy to fulfil, and they often create dilemma situations. We are individuals as well as social beings; we want to be unique and make a difference, but we also want to belong to others. When communicating and expressing our need for intimacy, our need for independence may become at risk.

According to Tannen, men and women express themselves differently and thus construct different frames in interaction for different reasons. Men use communication to express and maintain independence, while women try to maintain intimacy when communicating. These differences result in different perceptions and experiences, which may cause misunderstanding. Such perceptions and experiences are expressed in conversations within interpretive communities. Taking into account that reality is constructed in interaction, it is suggested that while communicating in different interpretive communities, perceptions

and experiences will be reaffirmed, reproduced and strengthened in every interaction in which they are not actively contested.

Drawing on Tannen's theory, a difference can be expected in the way public relations men and women perceive their influence in the organisation. As she argues, even when they live in the same neighbourhood, the same block or the same house, boys and girls grow up in different worlds and words (Tannen, 1990). Male and female public relations professionals could be living in different worlds and words as well. The perception of being taken seriously by senior management as a male or female public relations professional is the result of reproduction and reaffirmation in interaction. Within the 'we-group', in Tannen's words, a group that resembles the dominant coalition in an organisation, such existing images are repeated and strengthened all the time and are reproduced in every interaction in which they are not actively neglected or contested.

Men, women and social media

In our study, social media refers to new media such as the internet and the mobile phone. It is about the social networks people participate in, which arise, change and often also disappear in these media. Recent studies from the Netherlands on the competencies and characteristics of people who often use social media show that these people tend to be 1) social, 2) involved, 3) dedicated, 4) seeking intimacy and 5) media-smart (Boschma & Groen, 2008; Veen, 2009). These people believe that cooperation is beneficial, everyone is equal, everyone can learn from others and learning by doing is more productive (ibid, 2008; 2009). Such skills, competences and experiences are clearly connected to what is perceived as a female style of communication (Tannen, 1994). Women may feel more comfortable using social media because these tools help them accomplish their communication goals while maintaining intimacy. By using social media for communication, they will become more experienced and skilled in the use of these media, which will make the gap between men and women in the use of social media bigger. With regard to our question about possible gender differences in the perception and use of

social media, we can expect that differences indeed exist between male and female public relations professionals.

Methodology

To answer the research questions, a secondary analysis was conducted on the data from the annual survey of the European Communication Monitors of 2008 and 2009 (University of Leipzig, 2008; 2009). This secondary analysis is a pilot study and is intended to explore the data on possible perceptual differences between male and female professionals on their influence in the organisation and the importance of social media and social networks for public relations. The data from the European Communication Monitors are especially suited for that purpose because the aims of these surveys are to monitor trends in communication management in Europe, to analyse the changing framework for the communication profession in Europe, to evaluate specific topics of the profession, and to identify developments across different types of organisations, countries and regions of Europe. Via email, 20,000+ subscribers to Communication Director Magazine, the only pan-European magazine in the field of communication management and public relations, were invited to join the survey. Additional invitations were sent to members of professional associations for communication in several European countries. For consistency, replies from respondents who were not currently working in communication management or public relations (for example, students and academics) were removed from the dataset. This resulted in a final response of 1524 respondents in 2008 and 1863 in 2009.

As shown in Table 1, a slightly higher percentage of the respondents in both samples were female: 54.8 percent in 2008 and 50.7 percent in 2009. The largest percentage of respondents had more than 10 years of experience in communication management, and most of them worked in communication departments of joint stock companies, which are companies with multiple owners that are quoted on the stock market, or as communications consultants. Professionals working in private companies and

governmental or non-profit organisations are well represented in the sample. Respondents worked in over 30 different European countries with the most from Western Europe (e.g., Germany, the Netherlands and France) followed by Northern (e.g., Norway, United

Kingdom and Latvia), Southern (e.g., Spain, Slovenia, Croatia, Greece and Italy) and Eastern Europe (e.g., Bulgaria, Poland and the Czech Republic). See Table 1 for an overview of the characteristics of the sample.

Table 1
Sample from the European Communication Monitors in 2008 and 2009

	Europe	
	2008	2009
Number of respondents	1524	1863
Female	54.8% (n=835)	50.7% (n=945)
Male	45.2% (n=688)	49.3% (n=918)
Experience		
> 10 years	45.3% (n=690)	58.3% (n=1086)
6 – 10 years	24.2% (n=368)	26.9% (n=502)
< 5 years	30.5% (n=463)	14.8% (n=275)
Working at		
Communication department:		
-joint stock company	27.9% (n=425)	29.7% (n=553)
-private company	17.8% (n=272)	18.4% (n=342)
-government	12.1% (n=184)	12.7% (n=237)
-non-profit organization	9.5% (n=144)	11.5% (n=214)
-agency/consultant	32.6% (n=496)	27.8% (n=517)
Region		
Northern Europe	22.2% (n=338)	31.1% (n=579)
Western Europe	50.3% (n=766)	41.4% (n=772)
Southern Europe	15.9% (n=242)	19.0% (n=354)
Eastern Europe	11.0% (n=167)	8.5% (n=158)

Note: the classification of the European regions is based on the standard classification of the United Nations (2008).

Because there is no information about the population of communication professionals in Europe, we do not claim that the data from the European Communication Monitor are representative for Europe. However, the number of respondents is large enough to produce valid results.

For our analysis, we used the demographic variable gender, which was measured in both surveys as the independent variable. We focused on male and female perceptions of the influence of public relations professionals on management decisions and on the use and evaluation of new and social media. Gender differences are also explored in different

European regions. The influence of public relations professionals on management decisions was measured in the survey with two questions about how seriously communicative recommendations are taken by senior management and how communication professionals perceive that their recommendations are factored into the strategic decision making and planning of the organisation. In 2008 and 2009, questions were asked about the importance of social media (defined as blogs, podcasts and so on) and social networks (defined as online communities) today and in the future. In the survey of 2009, two additional questions were

asked about whether communication goals were met with online communities and the social network memberships of the communication

professionals themselves. See Table 2 for the constructs and the exact questions that were asked in the survey.

Table 2

Constructs and questions about management influence and social media in the European Communication Monitors of 2008 and 2009 used in the secondary analysis of the data on gender differences

Construct	Item	Question
Influence on management	Seriousness	In your organization, how seriously are public relations recommendations taken by senior management? (7 point scale)
	Strategic impact	To what extent are PR and reputation considerations factored into strategic decisions and planning in the organization? (7 point scale)
Social media	Channels and instruments	How important are the following methods in addressing stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences? Will this change within the next three years? (5 point scale)
Social networks	Interactive channels	Can you indicate the level of importance for public relations today and in the next year of the following communication tools? (5 point scale)
	Online communities and communication goals	How will your organization use social networks within its online communication strategy within the next 12 months? (5 point scale)
	Private and professional participation	Are you a member of one of those social networks?

Results

The secondary analysis of the European Communication Monitor data shows that male public relations professionals perceive themselves as being taken more seriously by senior management in their organisation than female professionals do. On a 7-point scale, men scored an average of 5.36 (*standard deviation* = 1.35) on being taken seriously while women scored a 4.97 (*SD* = 1.50) in 2009. The differences are significant for all

European regions except for Eastern Europe. Notably, there is no difference in the perception of how seriously public relations recommendations are taken by senior management between male and female professionals in Eastern Europe. On the level of Europe, the differences between public relations men and women in their perception of their impact on the strategic decision-making and planning of the organisations are significant as well; in 2009, men scored an

average of 5.00 ($SD = 1.42$) on strategic impact while women scored an average of 4.72 ($SD = 1.50$). In 2008, the differences were greater in Southern Europe than in the other European regions, and the perceptual differences appeared in Northern and Western Europe in

2009 as well. Again, Eastern Europe is the exception; no significant differences were found in the perception of the strategic impact of men and women. See Table 3 for an overview of the results.

Table 3
Mean and standard deviation on ‘taken seriously’ and ‘strategic impact’ and ‘gender’ (7-point scale)

	Taken seriously				Strategic impact			
	2008 M	SD	2009 M	SD	2008 M	SD	2009 M	SD
Europe	5.25	1.14	5.16	1.45	4.81	1.39	4.85	1.47
Male	5.42***	1.23	5.36***	1.35	4.93**	1.36	5.00***	1.42
Female	5.11	1.33	4.97	1.50	4.72	1.41	4.72	1.50
Northern Europe	5.44	1.21	5.36	1.32	5.01	1.33	5.04	1.44
Male	5.61*	1.14	5.50*	1.22	5.10	1.36	5.21*	1.40
Female	5.31	1.25	5.24	1.39	4.95	1.30	4.91	1.46
Western Europe	5.32	1.28	5.13	1.43	4.83	1.35	4.76	1.49
Male	5.46**	1.21	5.40***	1.33	4.92	1.32	4.90*	1.44
Female	5.18	1.32	4.86	1.49	4.74	1.38	4.61	1.52
Southern Europe	5.09	1.34	4.86	1.52	4.77	1.35	4.75	1.40
Male	5.33*	1.31	5.12*	1.42	5.01*	1.39	5.03**	1.28
Female	4.95	1.35	4.64	1.58	4.63	1.51	4.50	1.45
Eastern Europe	4.77	1.42	5.04	1.73	4.40	1.54	4.79	1.62
Male	4.99	1.44	5.00	1.73	4.59	1.64	4.67	1.54
Female	4.62	1.40	5.08	1.76	4.27	1.46	4.90	1.70

Note. In 2009, this question was only answered by people working in communications departments and not by people working at agencies.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

In a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) where gender was controlled for the number of years of experience in the profession, we did not find an interaction effect for Europe as a whole. Gender has a significant main effect on “taken seriously” (2008: $F(1, 1516) = 13.679$, $p < .001$; 2009: $F(1, 1362) = 20.850$, $p < .001$) and on “strategic impact” (2008: $F(1, 1516) = 8.215$, $p < .01$; 2009: $F(1, 1361) = 12.231$, $p < .001$), and experience also has a significant effect on “taken seriously” (2008: $F(3, 1516) = 8.674$, $p < .001$; 2009: $F(2, 1362) = 17.655$, $p < .001$) and on “strategic impact” (2008: $F(3, 1516) = 4.130$, $p < .01$; 2009: $F(2, 1361) = 22.052$, $p < .001$). We did, however, find some regional differences. In Eastern Europe, neither gender nor experience produced a significant main effect or an interaction effect in 2008. In 2009, the number

of years of experience explained the mean difference in “strategic impact” significantly ($F(2, 91) = 3.652$, $p < .05$). In Northern Europe, no interaction effect between gender and experience was found in 2008, but gender, in this model, produced a significant main effect only on “taken seriously” ($F(1, 331) = 4.269$, $p < .05$) and not on “strategic impact”. In 2009, a significant interaction effect was found on “taken seriously” ($F(2, 448) = 3.196$, $p < .05$). This means that in Northern Europe the difference in the perceived seriousness is explained by the combination of gender and experience. In Western Europe, no interaction effects were found, but significant main effects of gender ($F(1, 759) = 6.095$, $p < .05$) and experience ($F(3, 759) = 3.398$, $p < .05$) on “taken seriously” were found in 2008. In 2009, these main effects on “taken seriously” were

significant as well (respectively, $F(1, 590) = 14,145, p < .001$ and $F(2, 590) = 12,732, p < .001$), and in this model only a main effect was shown for experience on “strategic impact” ($F(2, 588) = 9,961, p < .001$). Finally, in Southern Europe no interaction effects were found, but a main effect of gender on “taken seriously” ($F(1, 235) = 6,472, p < .05$) and “strategic impact” ($F(3, 235) = 4,402, p < .05$) is identified in 2008. In 2009, no significant main effects were found in this model in Southern Europe. The explained variance of this model with gender and experience varied from an R^2 of .014 to .126.

Social media, social networks and communication goals

In 2008, men and women thought similarly about the topical importance of social media like blogs and podcasts. However, men and women thought differently about the future importance of social media; in 2008, women scored an average of 3.61 ($SD = 1.15$) on a 5-point scale while men had a significantly lower average of 3.44 ($SD = 1.11$). Moreover, women valued both the topical and future importance of social media more than men in 2009. There seems to be a gap in the perceived importance of social media between men and women in the public relations profession. See Table 4 for an overview of the results.

Table 4
Mean and standard deviation of perceived importance of social media (e.g. blogs and podcasts) by gender (5-point scale)

	Importance of social media				Importance of social media			
	2008		Future		2009		Future	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Europe	2.29	1.05	3.53	1.14	2.59	1.07	3.90	1.04
Male	2.30	1.07	3.44**	1.11	2.51**	1.05	3.77***	1.04
Female	2.28	1.04	3.61	1.15	2.66	1.10	4.03	1.02

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Remarkably, there is a weak but significant correlation between the perceived seriousness and strategic impact of the professional and the perceived importance of social media in the future (respectively, $r = .16, p < .01$ and $r = .19, p < .01$ in 2008 and $r = .11, p < .01$ and $r = .16, p < .01$ in 2009). This correlation indicates that professionals who value social media more highly also perceive their own effectiveness as consultant for senior management as being higher.

Women not only consider the use of social media as more important than men do, but they also judge the use of social networks, such as online communities, as being more important than do their male colleagues. In both years, the differences are significant (see Table 5). Just as with social media, there is also a weak but significant correlation between the perceived seriousness and strategic impact of the professional and the perceived importance of social networks in the future (respectively, $r = .06, p < .05$ and $r = .08, p < .01$ in 2008 and $r = .10, p < .01$ and $r = .10, p < .01$ in 2009).

Table 5

Mean and standard deviation of perceived importance of social networks (online communities) by gender (5-point scale)

	Importance of social networks				Importance of social networks			
	2008		Future		2009		Future	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Europe	2.98	1.13	3.86	1.14	2.98	1.08	3.93	1.07
Male	2.85***	1.10	3.71***	1.14	2.81***	1.07	3.75***	1.09
Female	3.08	1.14	3.99	1.11	3.14	1.06	4.10	1.02

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

In 2009, public relations professionals were asked to indicate how their organisation would use social networks within its online communication strategy in the next year. No differences were found between men and women in the use of social networks for sender-oriented communication activities, such as monitoring opinion building, targeting specific stakeholders and running viral campaigns. Men and women scored equally on those activities.

Female professionals, on the other hand, tended to use social networks significantly more than their male colleagues for interactive communication, such as initiating dialogue, establishing new relationships, demonstrating innovation and openness, stimulating new ideas and exploring digital communication cultures (see Table 6). Public relations women use online communities more than men to execute two-way communication and to strengthen resources and competencies.

Table 6

Mean and standard deviation of perceived online communities and communication goals by gender (5-point scale) in Europe

	Male		Female		t	sign
	M	SD	M	SD		
Monitoring opinion building	3.09	1.16	3.06	1.21	-.41	.680
Targeting specific stakeholders	3.21	1.20	3.30	1.23	1.59	.113
Demonstrating innovation and openness	3.20	1.17	3.37	1.17	3.20	.001
Initiating dialogue with stakeholders	3.11	1.21	3.23	1.19	2.03	.042
Establishing new relationships/ partnerships	3.13	1.20	3.25	1.19	2.12	.034
Stimulating new ideas	3.14	1.19	3.34	1.20	3.56	.000
Running viral campaigns	2.74	1.26	2.81	1.32	1.13	.260
Exploring digital communication cultures	2.96	1.23	3.10	1.26	2.43	.015

Individual social networks

LinkedIn is the most popular social network for professional use among both male and female public relations professionals in Europe. Men use Plaxo significantly more for professional

reasons than women, $t = -2.944$, $p < .01$. The most popular personal profile amongst professionals is Facebook. Women use Facebook significantly more than men as a personal profile, $t = 3.015$, $p < .01$.

Table 7
Private and professional membership of social networks, in percentage in 2009

	PR practitioners with a professional profile			PR practitioners with a personal profile		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
LinkedIn	55.4	27.2	28.2	11.2	5.6	5.6
XING	19.8	10.5	9.3	4.7	2.4	2.3
Plaxo	14.8	6.3	8.5	4.3	2.2	2.1
Facebook	12.2	5.9	6.3	48.5	22.2	26.4
MySpace	1.1	0.6	0.5	6.0	3.4	2.6
Other	11.3	6.5	4.8	14.8	7.0	7.7

N = 1863

Conclusion and discussion

In the gendered profession of public relations in Europe, there are different constructed realities and different interpretive communities surrounding the strategic impact of public relations professionals. The results of our pilot study, a secondary analysis of the European Communication Monitors of 2008 and 2009, show a consistent and significantly different perception by men and women about their influence on senior management and the strategic decisions and planning of their organisations. Public relations women in Northern (e.g. the Scandinavian countries, the UK, Ireland and the Baltic states), Western (e.g. The Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and France) and Southern Europe (e.g. Spain, Portugal, Italy, Slovenia, Greece and Croatia) are more pessimistic about their influence and their strategic impact than public relations men in those regions. On a general level, we did not find an interaction effect between gender and experience, except in 2009 in Northern Europe

on the perception of how serious public relations recommendations are taken by senior management. It seems that gender is for the most part independent of the number of years of experience in the profession in terms of influencing perceptions of success. Women and men seem to be part of different interpretive communities in which the perceptions of public relations influence in organisations are constructed. They are, in other words, socialised differently through the group they are part of, and professional socialisation does not apparently overcome differences in perceptions of influence. This conclusion is in line with a study on gender and communication within the medical profession (Lagro-Janssen, 2008). In Eastern Europe, we found no significant differences on this issue. It seems that even though the economic position of women in Central and Eastern Europe has deteriorated during the transition from communism to the neoliberal economy since 1989 (Pollert, 2003), a cultural 'equality' in the

field of public relations has come into being. Experience instead of gender could play a role here because we found a main effect on “strategic impact” in 2009.

The different perceptions of male and female professionals about their influence on senior management and the different interpretive communities that exist about this in organisations could be explained by the different ways of expression of men and women as Tannen (1990) noted. These differences could also be explained by the constant confirmation and reproduction of the idea that public relations women have less influence than public relations men, and we might be able to observe here the cycle of powerlessness (Grunig et al., 2001) for public relations women in management. We should take notice of this possibility. Further qualitative research about how public relations men and public relations women talk about their respective influence on senior management and strategic impact on the decision-making and planning in the organisation is therefore necessary. What kind of conversation might enable the differences, and how does it shift or change? The analysis of the data from the European Communication Monitor indicate that there are regional differences in this conversation and that the perception of men and women could be changing because, for example, we did not find a main effect of gender (connected with experience) on “strategic impact” in Northern Europe as of 2009. Is this an example of a shifting conversation in Northern Europe, or are other factors at work here? Further quantitative research is also necessary because the model we used here had only gender and experience as factors. Because of these limitations, the explained variance of this model was in general rather low and was 12 percent at the highest. Other factors might be at work here as well and could be independent of or interactive with gender. Alternative factors might include position in the organisation, age, type of organisation, education and knowledge of communication processes and effects.

Our analysis suggests that women may have stronger feelings for social media than men. Female professionals value social media and

social networks more than men, and the difference seems to be growing. Here, the data also suggest different realities and different interpretive communities with regard to the value and use of social media. Because social media today have become a permanent part of the media system, such media could work as an instrument to empower women in public relations, especially because there is a correlation between valuing social media and the perceived effectiveness of public relations recommendations. New social media technologies could therefore help women to empower themselves and to increase their self-perception of effectiveness. The way in which the female view values social media significantly more than the male view for interactive communication like dialoguing, establishing relationships and exploring digital cultures underscores this possibility.

On a more general level, our analysis suggests the existence of the fundamental phenomena of inclusion and exclusion that become manifest in different frames regarding the influence of public relations men and public relations women. These frames are constructed in different interpretive communities of men and women, leading to the perception that public relations men have more influence on senior management than public relations women. These different perceptions are interesting within the framework of liberal feminist theory (Grunig, et al., 2001; Rakow & Nastasia, 2009) because they show that there are gender systems in place and that these perceptions may lead to unequal distributions of gender roles in the organisation. They may also lead to a different distribution of power of public relations men and public relations women in organisations and to different power of the public relations profession in an organisation depending on the gender of the professionals that practice public relations for the organisation. That is an important consideration for a feminised profession. It is not easy to change these perceptions and frames because inclusion and exclusion are more or less subtly constructed, maintained and even reinforced in different interaction contexts at different scales; this is also true in the case of gender differences. Nevertheless, starting again

from the assumption that reality is constructed through conversation, it could be suggested that public relations professionals can start by being more aware of the gender issues in their gendered profession. This will first require more detailed research on the issue of how stereotyping and stigmatising of men and women is constructed by means of talk. Testing alternative hypotheses about gender in combination with other factors could shed more light on the issue. In 2012, after five editions of the European Communication Monitor, the collected data from all those years could be further analysed. This pilot study shows that the European Communication Monitor can be an appropriate source of data to discuss gender issues and related factors. Secondly, these more detailed findings could be linked to similar discussions at other places and levels in society with the aim of changing the background conversations that feed stereotyping and stigmatisation at different local levels (Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002).

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