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International study on public relations and sustainability: state of the art in Brazilian and Ecuadorian organisations

Estudio internacional sobre Relaciones Públicas y Sustentabilidad: el estado del arte en organizaciones brasileñas y ecuatorianas

Dates | Received: 20/07/2018 - Reviewed: 04/11/2018 - In press: 16/11/2018 - Published: 01/01/2019

Abstract

This study presents the results of an international research project carried out in Brazilian and Ecuadorian companies. The study's purpose was to test whether public relations practices have any influence in sustainability processes in the above countries and how this influence is perceived. The study was structured in three steps: first, a review of the literature was performed; second, questionnaires were applied to 177 Communications managers in both countries and, third, 18 professionals from within this sample were interviewed. The results show the importance of the communications department in promotion of the practices of social responsibility and sustainability. The study also revealed that this department is vital for increasing employees' sense of belonging within organisations, for strengthening corporate identity, and for creating closer ties with different stakeholders.

Resumen

El presente texto presenta los resultados de una investigación internacional realizada con empresas brasileñas y ecuatorianas. El objetivo del estudio fue verificar si las prácticas de relaciones públicas influyen en los procesos de sustentabilidad de los referidos países y cómo lo hacen. La investigación se efectuó en tres etapas: la primera se centró en la revisión bibliográfica de literatura especializada, en la segunda se aplicaron encuestas a 177 responsables de comunicación de ambos países, y en la tercera se efectuaron 18 entrevistas a profesionales seleccionados de la misma muestra. Los resultados demuestran que, para un tercio de esas organizaciones, el departamento de comunicación tiene la función de impulsar acciones de responsabilidad social y sustentabilidad. Se verificó además que el área de comunicación es esencial para aumentar el sentido de pertenencia de los empleados, reforzar la identidad corporativa y estrechar lazos con los diferentes stakeholders.

Keywords

Communications; management; public relations; social responsibility; symmetrical communication; sustainability; communications; public relations; social responsibility; symmetrical communication; sustainability.

Palabras clave

Comunicación; gestión de comunicación; relaciones públicas; responsabilidad social; sustentabilidad; comunicación; relaciones públicas; responsabilidad social; sustentabilidad.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, social responsibility and sustainability processes have acquired a greater relevance in organizations worldwide. In Latin America, where most countries are in a process of development, social responsibility and sustainability are necessary to support new management mechanisms with the aim of fostering greater transparency among organizations and strengthen their relationships with the publics with whom they have ties.

When discussing sustainable and responsible practices, organizations must view trust as a fundamental concept to take into consideration. Trust is becoming more and more of an essential value for organizations. According to Grunig and Kim (2011), trust is the future expectation people have regarding an organization's behavior based on past actions; therefore, it is possible to consider it a sub product of an organization's behavior as well as of the quality of the relationships it establishes with its publics. This condition can only be reached through permanent communication between the organization and the social groups or individuals with whom it is linked.

The majority of studies and research on this topic have as a main focus the verification of the impact of social responsibility and sustainability practices on an organization's income; that is, how sustainability processes can guarantee greater earnings for shareholders. Organizations often fail to perceive how the value of their income must be linked with transparent practices that legitimize their activities. For this purpose, this research aims to demonstrate that communication can support sustainability processes and verify the positive effect it has on an organization's development as a whole.

This study intends to fill an existing gap in the literature on public relations, communications, and sustainability in Latin America given how the important contribution of these disciplines is often minimized, even as they help legitimize organizations and strengthen their relationships with publics of interest.

It is worth highlighting that Brazil was the first country in the world to implement a law (5.377) in 1967 to officialize the professional practice of public relations. Along with the aforementioned law, the first university public relations program was created at the University of Sao Paulo, USP. These events have enabled Brazil to become the first country in the region to foster the formal development of academic research on public relations. As of 2018, there are more than 60 undergraduate public relations programs and approximately 20 master's degree and PhD programs in this discipline across the country.

In Ecuador, the academic development of public relations has only gained traction in the last decades. According to a study by Elizalde and Yaguache (2010), at this time, there are 12 universities in the country that offer a public relations program. Five of them offer it as a specialization and six offer it as a technological course; at this time, there are no master's degree or PhD programs in public relations in Ecuador.

For the present research, public relations is defined as the philosophy of relationship building and a group of activities that foster the formation of networks of interaction, retroaction, decision-making, and events that materialize on a daily basis. Conflicts, chaos, and disruptions are inevitable outcomes of these negotiations, disputes and consensus-building, as well as public relations activities that create new organizational mandates (Ferrari & França 2011).

Starting in the year 1990, the region experienced an important surge in the launch of sustainability and social responsibility projects, particularly in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile (Lozano, 2000). According to Torresano (2012), Ecuador was the exception to this surge due to its economic and political reality at the time, which saw Ecuadorian firms focusing on overcoming the economic deficit and avoiding bankruptcy, thus setting aside social interests (Crusellas, 2014; Durán & Mosquera, 2016). Initiatives led by Latin American companies began to multiply and show an exponential growth from 2006 to 2010 (Sierra, Benau, & Zorio, 2014). Between 2009 and 2015, regional publications related to Global Compact began to emerge (Centro Regional de Apoyo para América Latina y el Caribe, 2016).

It is worth noting that the first concept of social responsibility was spread in 1960 in Brazil through the creation of associations and entities dedicated to training executives and companies in processes of social responsibility. However, it wasn't until 1990 that entities such as ETHIS (ETHOS Institute of Business and Social Responsibility), CEBEDS (Brazilian Business Council for Sustainable Development) and AKATU (AKATU Institute) were created to train executives, exert influence on public policy, and offer tools for the implementation of new management models. CEBEDS was the first institution in Brazil to address sustainability using the Triple Bottom Line concept, which guides the actions of companies based on three pillars: economic, social, and environmental.

It must be recognized that in Ecuador, little has been disseminated on the philosophy of sustainability; moreover, the concept of social responsibility itself was late to arrive. In the 1980s, early discussions about social responsibility characterized it as a private initiative. Its best forums were local manufacturing associations that were later joined by regional development organizations and sectional governments that helped comprise the first entities concerned about the issue. In 2011, Pacto Global Ecuador network (Global Pact Ecuador) was created with the goal of promoting the 10 principles of the Global Pact of the United Nations in the country. As of 2018, the network is comprised of 125 members including public and private companies, civil society organizations, NGOs, trade associations, and academia, all of which are committed to the application of the 10 principles, respect human rights, labor and environmental standards, and the fight against corruption (Pacto Global, 2018). However, the Ecuadorian outlook on social responsibility and sustainability, according to various scholars, is currently in its initial stages (Lansdale & Ramos, 2013), even though more than half of all Ecuadorian companies are engaged in responsible practices. The number of qualified companies is limited and not all adequately comply with established laws and norms; furthermore, it can hardly be said that they go beyond what is required, which is a fundamental characteristic of socially responsible companies.

Despite the existence of entities that represent and support sustainability practices at companies in both countries, there is a lack of academic empirical studies about the situation and the practice of social responsibility and sustainability. Trustworthy, comparative studies among countries have not been conducted, which makes it very difficult to formulate generalizations about responsible, sustainable practices.

With respect to the relationship between the communications field and that of social responsibility and sustainability, there is a gap in the literature that reflects the lack of local academic research on the importance of the communication process in sustainable practices. Given the lack of previous studies on the topic, particularly comparison studies of the practices of Brazilian and Ecuadorian companies, the study aimed to gather data to fill these gaps through a systematic analysis of current research on the problems that link public relations and sustainability. This text is divided into six sections: introduction, methodology, presentation of results, discussion, conclusions, and references.

2. Methodology

The research was exploratory, descriptive, and comparative in nature. The study was structured in three phases: first, the gathering and analysis of specialized literature in public relations, communications, social responsibility and sustainability. In the second phase, an online questionnaire was used as a quantitative instrument and sent to communications professionals from a sample of company databases from each country built by the authors. As a result, 177 completed questionnaires were received (123 from Brazil and 54 from Ecuador). Once the questionnaires were received, information was extracted from the respective databases which, along with the responses from Ecuador and Brazil, were later ordered and classified according to a previously developed coding plan. SPSS and Minitab were used as tools for the statistical analysis. This provided important alternatives for the analysis of multiple choice questions and multidimensional scales, as well as different aspects of variance analysis, all of which allowed the researchers to fulfil the proposed objectives.

In the third phase 18 interviews were conducted with communication professionals who had completed the questionnaire with the goal of examining some statistical results obtained in the second phase. To this purpose, a convenience sample was built by selecting professionals from different economic sectors and cities from each country. After conducting the interviews, these were transcribed and analyzed to propose conclusions and recommendations based on the reality presented.

Of all 177 organizations that responded, 123 were located in Brazil and of these, 87% (107) were from the private sector, 6% (8) were from the public sector, 3% (4) from a mixed sector, and 3% (4) were NGOs. Of the 54 organizations in Ecuador, 74% (40) were from the private sector, 24% (13) were from the public sector, and 1% (1) self-identified as an NGO.

In both countries, most of the participating organizations were classified as belonging to the industrial sector, with 55% (68) in Brazil and 44% (24) in Ecuador. Thirty five percent (43) of the organizations in Brazil and 42% (23) of the organizations in Ecuador belonged to the services sector. Finally, 10% (12) of the companies surveyed in Brazil and 14% (7) of those surveyed in Ecuador belonged to the commercial sector. It could be observed that the representation of each sector in both countries was quite similar, which facilitated the analysis and comparison of the communication practices in both countries.

3. Analysis of the results

All the Brazilian and Ecuadorian organizations had a communications department, which was a basic criterion for the research. According to the sample, in Brazil, 1% (19) of the communications professionals had completed an undergraduate degree, followed by 63% (77) of those communications professionals who had completed a specialized degree, 10% (12) who had obtained a master's degree, and barely 3% (4) who held a PhD. The results show a low number of Brazilian communications professionals with postgraduate degrees, which is evidence that the Brazilian labor market, with the exception of the academic field, does not take into consideration master's degrees and PhDs in hiring processes. Moreover, it appears to give more weight to professional skills and competencies, as well as prior experience, to the detriment of academic degrees. In Ecuador, the results were different from those in Brazil, with 43% (23) of the participants reporting they held a master's degree and 32% (17) reporting they had obtained an undergraduate degree. The high percentage of professionals with a master's degree shows the importance postgraduate education in Ecuador has gained in the last two decades. It is worth noting that a master's degree in Ecuador confers professional status, while in Brazil master's degrees are more academic in nature.

3.1 Reporting structure of communications departments

Another important aspect is the location of communications/public relations in the organizational structure of the researched companies. In both countries, 47% of communications professionals report directly to the president or CEO. This result indicates that practically half of all communications departments are at a staff level, meaning that management considers it necessary for communications professionals to be directly dependent on the president or highest ranking executive; this proximity enables them to execute their strategic functions. This context was highlighted by Grunig and Kim (2011) as positive when they demonstrated, through the Excellence Study project, that one of the basic principles of excellent communications is the direct participation of the communications professional alongside management.

Afterward, the researchers verified whether communications was valued by management. According to Ferrari (2016), the process of communications in an organization begins when members of the management team establish policies, norms and directives so that communications professionals can define strategies for relationship building with strategic publics based on the framework of the organization's identity. The item described as "Communications aspects are included in sustainability processes," received a more favorable ranking among Ecuadorian and Brazilian communications professionals at 2.2 compared to the other items; however, taking into consideration a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 reflected a high degree of importance, this item indicates that the importance given by management to communications professionals is not optimal in either of the two countries. All other items were ranked differently among the respondents, which may be due to their differing levels of knowledge, as well as management models, local cultural aspects, and other possible influences.

Regarding topics related to employees, in Brazil, management has a higher recognition of the importance of employees' opinions than in Ecuador, which shows that Brazilian organizations have a clearer understanding of how workers are essential for building a positive reputation. It is also worth mentioning that in Brazil, organizational culture is more participative compared to Ecuador, thereby enabling employees to feel empowered. In addition, large Brazilian organizations understand that maintaining a constant dialogue with company members helps improve work performance and consolidate an organizational culture. In Ecuador, this does not occur in equal measure due to the existence of a more authoritarian management style as a result of the country's cultural characteristics. This reflection was complemented by Villacís (2015), who, based on studies in Ecuadorian organizations, verified that organizational culture in Ecuador has the following characteristics: high power distance related to strong discipline and strict hierarchies, high uncertainty avoidance linked to a vertical management style, and low individualism, which refers to organizations immersed in a collectivist society with a high majority of men and a near non-existent presence of women in upper and middle management. The characteristics highlighted by the author reinforce Hofstede's (1997) assertions that, in societies like Ecuador's, the percentage of women in professional positions is minimal.

Another goal of the research was to verify whether management had a clear idea of the strategic function of the communications department and its importance in decision-making. This is aligned with the symmetrical model of communication by Grunig and Hunt (1984), which values mutual comprehension between the organization and its publics and vice versa, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Importance of the department for management

	Brazil	Ecuador	Total
Support to improve the organization's reputation with the interest of increasing sales.	23 (19%)	13 (24%)	36 (20%)
Counsel to management in communications policies, defining strategic publics, and legitimizing the company's brand.	63 (51%)	27 (50%)	90 (51%)
Support in the creation of communications instruments and maintaining a close relationship with the media.	32 (26%)	3 (6%)	35 (20%)
Dissemination of the organization's products to reinforce its qualities compared to the competition.	5 (4%)	11 (20%)	16 (9%)
Total	123 (70%)	54 (30%)	177 (100%)

Source: Online surveys completed by communications professionals in both countries.

For 51%(63) and 50% (27) of Brazilian and Ecuadorian communications professionals, respectively, management believes the communications department must provide counsel on communications policies, define strategic publics, and legitimize the company's brand. This result is quite positive, as it shows that the organization perceives communications as a key function in the achievement of organizational success and the improvement of relationships with stakeholders. Next, 26% (32) of Brazilian respondents declared that management sees them as "support to create communications instruments and maintain a close relationship with the media," while 24% (13) of communications professionals in Ecuador believe management sees them as "support to improve the organization's reputation with the interest of increasing sales."

In both cases, it is possible to conclude that, through communication, management seeks an effective and tangible return that supports its business, either through reputation or relationship-building campaigns with the media to win over consumers, clients, and public opinion. It appears that management, as part of the sample, does not take into account the value of communications as a permanent support function to help reach intangible assets such as trust, credibility, and transparency.

3.2 Communications and sustainability

In recent years, it has become accepted as a premise that communications and sustainability must emerge jointly, metaphorically speaking, as if they were two sides of the same coin that depend on each other. Sustainable management is associated with how organizations relate to society, the environment, and, mainly, their publics. Therefore, this requires the communications processes of these organizations to be transparent and beneficial for both the organizations themselves and the strategic publics that surround them.

A fundamental objective of the present study was to identify whether the areas of communication and sustainability work together. The results revealed that 37% (65) of the organizations in both countries manage their communications and sustainability activities in separate departments, while 31% (55) manage them in the same department, as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Relationship between the areas of communication and sustainability

	Brazil	Ecuador	Total
Under the same department	41 (33%)	14 (26%)	55 (31%)
Separate areas	50 (41%)	15 (28%)	65 (37%)
No sustainable department exists	32 (26%)	25 (46%)	57 (32%)
Total	123 (70%)	54 (30%)	177 (100%)

Source: Online surveys completed by communications professionals in both countries.

It is a contemporary trend that the areas of communication and sustainability work together either in the same department or in a complementary manner. The reasons behind keeping these areas together can be explained by the responsibilities undertaken by communications in disseminating sustainable activities so that publics can obtain consistent, constant, and insightful information that generates a positive opinion

about an organization's behavior. One of the Ecuadorian interviewees remarked, "...the Communications department is basically a service provider that knows when to communicate, what program elements must be conveyed, and how to make them attractive for the media."

Three Brazilian interviewees affirmed that, at the beginning, their activities were limited to communicative processes, but that over time, their organizations added other areas to the communications department such as the case of sustainability. Today, communications professionals communicate all sustainability and social responsibility projects in an organization, in addition to meeting specific communications needs.

The results show that one third of the organizations, approximately 33% in Brazil and 26% in Ecuador, have opted to combine communications and sustainability into a single area, all while taking into account the convergences and complementarities that exist in both areas. For instance, stakeholder opinions, administrative focus and actions aimed towards social benefits are among the convergences shared by both areas. In terms of complementarities, sustainability is a management paradigm that aims to maintain a balanced relationship among the organization, society, the economy, and the environment. This requires communication so that dialogues can be generated with the public (Durán & Mosquera, 2016).

Since the concept of sustainability is still new, particularly in Ecuador, communications professionals were consulted about the definition of the term adopted by their own organizations. In Ecuador, one of the interviewees stated, "...every social responsibility project developed must be sustainable, which is understood as constant throughout time, and sustainable which means there are sufficient resources for it sustain itself." Another Ecuadorian interviewee noted that for her organization, "...social responsibility is the path that leads to sustainability, meaning it is the tool that allows us to meet the objective of improving the economic, social and environmental impacts of an organization."

Regarding the concept of sustainability that best characterized their organization, participants noted the following: in the case of Brazil, 44% (54) selected the definition of "sustainability is a business strategy that considers social, economic and environmental aspects" which, according to Elkington (2001), seeks to meet the three most important aspects of an organization. The numeric results of the Brazilian communications professionals may be interpreted in relation to the economic, political, and social reality that has enveloped the country since 2014. With the economic crisis, organizations began to prioritize business survival over their social role in society.

In Ecuador, the definition that ranked first place, with a 48% (26) of all those surveyed was that "sustainability is a transformative and collaborative culture whose aim is to mobilize an organization to develop sustainable products and services, thus contributing to the protection of the environment, continuous improvement of quality of life, and the guarantee of the rights of future generations."

The responses of the Ecuadorian organizations were more positive than those of their Brazilian counterparts; this shows that their concept of sustainability aligns with a symmetrical, inclusive and transparent perspective that points towards the idea that sustainability not only refers to business objectives, but also the well-being of employees and society. It may be that the 26 Ecuadorian organizations that chose this definition are large in size and have existing integrated sustainability plans in their processes (see Table 3).

Table 3: Concept of sustainability adopted by the organization

Concept	Brazil	Ecuador	Total
Business strategy that considers social, economic and environmental factors.	54 (44%)	12 (22%)	66 (37%)
A transformative and collaborative culture whose aim is to mobilize an organization to develop sustainable products and services, thus contributing to the protection of the environment, continuous improvement of quality of life, and the guarantee of the rights of future generations.	47 (38%)	26 (48%)	73 (41%)
A marketing push for products and services.	2 (2%)	7 (13%)	9 (5%)
A group of norms, regulations and certifications related to the environment, work relations and tax payments.	11 (9%)	4 (7%)	15 (9%)
The practice of disseminating cost reduction initiatives through improvements in efficiency and use of resources (water and energy), and adequate waste disposal.	9 (7%)	5 (9%)	14 (8%)
Total	123 (70%)	54 (30%)	177 (100)

Source: Online surveys completed by communications professionals in both countries.

Only 13% (7) of Ecuadorian communications professionals consider sustainability as a “tool to push marketing and services” and only 2% of Brazilian communications professionals share this opinion. The data show that the organizations that participated in the study showed advanced conceptual thinking about the relevance sustainability has for their businesses. It is clear that increases in sales and market positioning are not enough to present an organization as sustainable in front of stakeholders.

With respect to which sustainability attributes are most highly valued by management, communications professionals in Brazil mentioned meeting legal/fiscal duties (85%) and ethics (82%). In the case of Ecuador, the results were similar, with 87% choosing ethics and 80% for meeting fiscal/legal requirements. The emphasis given to ethics may be due to the corruption present in the political and economic contexts of both countries in recent years. A crisis of morals and values pushes organizations to practice more ethical and transparent actions in business and obey the law as a tangible mechanism of legal behavior.

To identify the relevant strategic objectives in sustainability management, seven options were made available so communications professionals could evaluate their importance. A scale of seven points was considered, where “1” signified the most important and “7” the least important. Thus, values closer to “1” showed the greater importance given to a determined objective. Averages and standard deviations were calculated as part of the analysis. The results obtained were later verified through the use of variance analysis to illustrate the significant differences between Brazil and Ecuador using a p value of 0.05. This aspect can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Strategic objectives for sustainability management

Objectives (averages and standard deviation)	Ecuador	Brazil
Promote social development through social and economic inclusion among the disadvantaged. (F=13.43, gl=1/171, p < 0.000)	2,3 (1,7)	3,5(2,0)
Contribute to the transformation of society through an increase in awareness of the public sustainability of the organization.	2,7 (1,9)	3,0 (1,8)
Disseminate ethical values in the promotion of sustainability and become a model to follow.	2,3 (1,9)	2,4 (1,7)
Ensure that the production and consumption of the company's products and services has a minimal impact on the supply chain and society.	2,3 (1,7)	2,8 (1,9)
Create a competitive advantage in the business, expand markets, and improve strategic positioning in sustainability. (F=8.57, gl=1/171, p < 0.004)	2,0 (1,4)	2,9 (1,9)
Manage the interests of strategic publics and coordinate the demands and strategic objectives of the business. (F=4.36, gl=1/171, p < 0.038)	2,2 (1,6)	2,7 (1,6)
Develop new products and processes oriented towards sustainability. (F= 13.45, gl=1/171, p < 0.000)	2,2 (1,6)	3,3 (1,9)

Source: Online surveys completed by communications professionals in both countries.

The results of the analysis of the data from Brazil show there are no significant differences in terms of objectives among national and multinational organizations. The analysis of Brazil on the topic of strategic objectives was focused on whether the organization was “Brazilian” (n=76) or “foreign” (n=47). The analysis was conducted in this manner due to the fact that the arrival or multinational companies in Brazil accelerated the implementation of the concept of sustainability and, in general, influenced the concepts of communication, social responsibility and sustainability in the Brazilian landscape.

The objective that obtained the highest points according to the Brazilian communications professionals was “disseminate ethical values in the promotion of sustainability and become a model to follow” with 2.4, while communications professionals in Ecuador valued this objective at 2.3. For the Brazilian survey respondents, the objectives “manage the interests of strategic publics and coordinate the demands and strategic objectives of the business” and “ensure that the production and consumption of the company's products and services has a minimal impact on the supply chain and society” were valued at 2.7 and 2.8, respectively, which demonstrates coherence with the chosen definition of sustainability.

Communications professionals in Ecuador gave the highest value (2.0) to the objective “create a competitive advantage in the business, expand markets, and improve strategic positioning in sustainability.” This demonstrates that the primary goal of the participating organizations in the study is to improve their business performance through sustainability management, even more so than adopting a

responsible behavior in social, environmental, and economic fields. One Ecuadorian interviewee highlighted the importance of sustainability to achieve a competitive advantage when she noted, "it's not only about maintaining the business, but differentiating oneself from the competition through sustainable actions over time that help generate development for interest groups with which the organization interacts."

The following objectives received the highest points from Ecuadorian communications professionals (2.2) "manage the interests of strategic publics and coordinate the demands and strategic objectives of the business" and "develop new products and processes oriented towards sustainability." These objectives are directly related to the business goals of organizations and are not focused on the concept of sustainability that was mentioned by them. This shows that it is possible to have an ideal concept of sustainability, but highlight goals in such a way that they reflect a situation where it is the business that benefits.

The perceptions of those belonging to management were also sought regarding the impact of communications on sustainability, according to the communications professionals in both countries (see Table 5).

Table 5: Perception of management regarding the impact of communications on sustainability processes

	Ecuador (n = 54)	Brazil (n = 123)	Total
The organization must work towards the interests of shareholders and not allocate resources to other areas.	4 (7,4%)	8 (6,5%)	12 (6,8%)
When there are economic resources available, the organization usually responds to requests from entities that represent vulnerable groups in society.	6 (11,1%)	13 (10,6%)	19 (10,73%)
The organization's strategic plan includes activities and collaborations to help causes of interest and those of certain groups.	5 (9,3%)	24 (19,5%)	29 (16,4%)
The organization systematically establishes alliances and Works on projects aligned with its mission and have a clear incidence on social, environmental and or economic areas.	39 (72,2%)	78 (63,4%)	117 (66,1%)

Source: Online surveys completed by communications professionals in both countries.

Sixty six percent of communication professionals in both countries (72% in Ecuador and 63% in Brazil) highlighted that their organization "systematically establishes alliances and works on projects aligned with its mission and have a clear incidence on social, environmental and or economic areas." The alternative valued most by communications professionals in Brazil and Ecuador indicates that management understands the importance of working on the three pillars of what is known as the triple bottom line; however, in previous answers it was possible to observe the importance attributed in practice to the economic pillar at the expense of the social pillar. The next most highlighted practice was "the organization's strategic plan includes activities and collaborations to help causes of interest and those of certain groups" by 16% (29) of the communications professionals in both countries.

This issue can be considered the core of the present research, as it clearly shows that most communications professionals (117) in both countries believe their organizations attempt to align their sustainability projects with their organizational goals. Such organizational behavior involves operating legally and legitimately with the organization adhering to current legislation and establishing alliances to develop projects aligned with its organizational philosophy and mission. Flores, Ogliastri, Peinado-Varas and Petri (2007) affirm that, in the case of Latin America, organizations in the majority of the region are subject to business codes and statutes and, in the case of companies that offer shares, stock market laws. Regulations regarding proper management of resources are generally established, but there is no obligation towards the maximization of benefits. Company managers have the authority to make decisions regarding the management of resources and they may, at their discretion, allocate partial resources to activities that benefit third parties so as long as the company is not adversely affected.

3.3 Communications planning

Finally, the research aimed to verify how communications professionals plan their work, since planning and control are the basis of an effective communications management which guide the focus sought and the results achieved (see Table 6).

Table 6: Workload planning of communications professionals

Workload planning	Brazil (n = 123)	Ecuador (n =54)	Total
Ensure that all possible time is allocated to the optimization of the organization's productivity and increase of profits.	6 (5%)	8 (15%)	14 (8%)
Meet and respond to requests from different social sectors without anticipating benefits to the organization.	3 (2%)	6 (11%)	9 (5%)
Activities that aim to solve environmental or social group problems linked to the organization or to the entities with which it engages in dialogue.	70 (57%)	9 (17%)	79 (45%)
Management and evaluation of strategies focused on increasing productivity, improving quality of life in sectors linked to environmental care based on interactions with other organizations.	44 (36%)	31 (57%)	75 (42%)

Source: Online surveys completed by communications professionals in both countries.

In Brazil, 57% (70) of communications professionals affirmed that their daily work incorporates "activities that aim to solve environmental or social group problems linked to the organization or to the entities with which it engages in dialogue." This means communications has a strategic role, mainly due to its concern for stakeholders and on maintaining a two-way dialogue with them in which the organization and its publics seek consensus and balance with respect to its needs.

In contrast, in Ecuador, 57% (31) of communications professionals affirmed that their activities regularly include "management and evaluation of strategies focused on increasing productivity, improving quality of life in sectors linked to environmental care based on interactions with other organizations." The results from the Ecuadorian communications professionals align with the asymmetrical model proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984) in which an organization wishes for its publics to adjust their expectations to meet those of the organization, not the reverse. It is worth considering that, given the Latin American landscape where economic crises are frequent and political systems are vulnerable, the practices of Ecuadorian communications professionals serve to show that communications is a process that is permanently and clearly oriented towards the improvement of the quality of life of sectors linked to environmental care; it is less oriented towards establishing relationships with its publics with the goal of persuading them to work collaboratively towards a better quality of life that includes the perception of its strategic publics.

4. Discussion

As mentioned previously, it was possible to find some research about public relations, communications, and sustainability in the specialized literature, either in the form of case studies or using samples of organizations in certain countries. The present study has as an innovative characteristic the analysis of public relations practices and their support in the sustainability processes in two countries: Brazil and Ecuador.

From a public relations standpoint, Brazil has a 50 year history of regulation as a profession. It also offers university programs in the field across the country as well as an academic tradition of research and production of bibliographic references. In Ecuador, public relations started to gain traction in 1990, which points to a large gap between both countries. The same can be said in terms of the countries' sustainability processes, which are also in various stages of development. Perhaps the differences between both countries is what produced such interesting results and lead to a rethinking of daily practices of organizations in topics of sustainability and public relations.

The research maintain that communications professionals are in charge of managing their organization's communications efforts both internally and externally. They must also have a deep understanding of the organization's business model, philosophy, and identity to carry out their functions correctly and to provide timely counsel to management. In this sense, public relations is a consultative activity within organizations that tends to have the ability to support sustainable processes, as observed in one third of the organizations surveyed. In only 55 (31%) of the 177 organizations surveyed, the areas of communications and sustainability were separate and in 57 (32%), there was simply no sustainability department. In the case of Ecuador, the number of organizations (46%) that have yet to structure a department of sustainability is quite high. This

shows there is still much to be done in terms of thinking of business goals that go beyond profits and making sustainable practices a part of the organization's purpose, as opposed to simply serving as discourse that is not applied in its daily activities. The research results align with the concept of sustainability adopted by the organizations in both countries. The two concepts most highlighted by the communications professionals surveyed are those that show advancement in terms of organizational philosophy.

In Brazil, 44% (55) of organizations described sustainability as a business strategy, considering Elkington's (1994) three pillars, while 38% (44) highlighted that sustainability is a transformative culture both for an organization and society. The division between the former and the latter concept of sustainability is perhaps linked to an organization's national and international nature; international organizations have already been working on this concept through policies established by their head offices. In the case of Ecuador, the percentages proved to be the opposite, with 48% (26) of Ecuadorians valuing sustainability as a transformative culture and 22% (12) as a business strategy.

The results show that in both countries there is much to be done in terms of the development of public relations professionals in academia as part of a strategic vision on behalf of management in recognizing that communications is a strategic process that can support sustainable practices.

With respect to economic, political, and social scenarios, it is evident that both countries have faced and are still affected by internal and external pressures regarding their public policies and the lack of trust of markets and society in general. According to the Trust Barometer study by Edelman, a communications consultancy, the lack of trust of citizens towards companies, government, media, and ONGs has been very high in recent years. The results reveal that people do not believe in the actions of organizations and this is reflected in the lack of credibility, respect, and legitimacy, among other values. Therefore, sustainability processes must be coherent with the organization's discourse. In the present study, some of the research results suggest that management has yet to correctly value the importance of public relations in securing the success of an organization.

It can be concluded that trust has become a priority for executives and boards at organizations due to its impact on client attraction and retention, company profitability, and market share. In the case of the present research, there is a close relationship between trust, organizational actions, and the political and economic scenario. This triad must be evaluated constantly by both Ecuadorian and Brazilian organizations.

Within the results, various similarities can be observed in the way communications/public relations departments in both countries carry out their activities. Differences were also observed that can be explained by public and institutional policies as well as cultural factors that impact the day to day Ecuadorian and Brazilian contexts. The differences and similarities are the result of the changes faced by organizations, a seismic change without precedent in the face of challenges brought on by social and environmental factors, technological innovation, and changing business models.

While both countries belong to a highly unstable political region, a significant portion of the organizations surveyed is working towards making a difference in society by establishing sustainability as a business strategy and recognizing communications as a sense building process so stakeholders can be a part of the organization's efforts.

The results also lead to reflection on the improvement of public relations education in Ecuador, since more university graduates in the field of public relations are needed to act strategically in companies across the country.

It is also clear that Latin American countries are characterized by cultural aspects that influence their management models and how and what organizations communicate. Among the responses given by the study participants, it was possible to observe the importance that descending hierarchies still hold, personalism, the tendency towards authoritarianism, as well as the lack of creativity and innovation. However, it was also evident that both countries have innovative organizations and economic groups more willing to reflect on common benefits and project towards the future as a way to survive in an era of globalization and vulnerability.

5. Conclusions

The results of the present research, in analyzing the realities of Latin American countries with significant differences in terms of geographical size, population, cultural features, as well as trajectory related to public relations development and communications regarding sustainability, shed light on similarities, challenges, advancements and problems spread among the differences previously mentioned. This is an analysis of

two Latin American countries that can serve as an example for other countries in the region, with the appropriate adjustments.

According to the results observed in the 177 participating organizations in the study, the benefits of having a solid concept and practice of communications and sustainability for the business of the organization serve as leverage for competitiveness, rather than activities used as marketing or philanthropic tools. It is also clear that communications and sustainable activities vary according to business and industry, depending on elements such as values, leadership models, internal and external culture, as well as business strategies.

Even with the differences observed in terms of development of academia in Brazil and Ecuador, it is worth noting that communications professionals in both countries are facing, in the second decade of the third millennium, the challenge of positioning public relations in the key processes of organizations. They are also fighting to have a role in making decisions that not only affect the organization itself, but its entire socioeconomic environment.

It is a fact that the study encountered reductionist perceptions of public relations as an operational function related to dissemination through the media and sustainability as a group of practices oriented towards promoting loyalty among clients and improving an organization's image. However, the data gathered show that both countries are experiencing a period of significant transition towards a mentality more inclined to conduct a truly two-way communication process that benefits both organizations and their publics.

The authors' evaluation of the research results is positive, since the least mentioned concepts were those that identified sustainability as a marketing and cost reduction tool within an organization. This shows the presence of an ethical view that will see future generations going beyond merely seeking immediate business results and moving towards achieving social, environmental, and economic well being for the community as a whole.

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to extend their thanks to Melita Vega for her dedication and professionalism in the translation of this article, thus helping us faithfully share the investigative process and fundamental contributions of this work with a wider audience of academics, professionals, and students around the world.

