Disciplinary approaches and theories in Argentinian public relations undergraduate programmes

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to verify the utilisation of the existing public relations general approaches and theories at a global scale in the public relations undergraduate programmes of the five leading Argentinian universities. A qualitative approach with an exploratory scope that employs data collection techniques such as the qualitative content analysis of academic documents, semi-structured in-depth interviews and structured surveys for ascertaining theoretical loading are used. Results reveal that public relations undergraduate programmes in Argentina present a markedly professional character and prefer theoretical frameworks linked to the functionalist tradition.

Keywords
Public relations, theoretical frameworks, higher education, Argentina

Introduction
According to (Ferrari and França, 2011), the beginnings of professional public relation practices in Latin America came about during 1914, when the Canadian São Paulo Tramway Light and Power Co opened its public relations (PR) department in the city of...
São Paulo, Brazil. Other countries in the region began to timidly adopt the practice of public relations during the 1930s and 1940s.

Public relations arrived in Argentina during the 1930s as a result of initiatives made by transnational companies such as Lever Brothers (UNILEVER), Shell, Siemens, Swift, Agfa-Gevaert, Price Whitehouse, Goodyear, Citibank and Kodak. The creation of professional public relations associations occurred in Brazil during 1954 and in Argentina during 1958 (Ferrari and França, 2011).

The 1970s were a decisive period for the education and training of public relations professionals in Latin America. Except for Argentina and Brazil – that began university-level public relations degree programmes during 1964 and 1967-neighbouring nations began in that decade, as a whole, with the implementation of post-secondary technical public relations programmes (Ferrari, 2009).

From an academic perspective, Argentina has become a leading regional player for both the establishment of university-based public relations programmes and for the number of higher education institutions that offered those courses. In fact, the undergraduate public relations programme opened during 1964 in Buenos Aires city was also the first public relations course in the Spanish-speaking world (Álvarez Nobell et al., 2016).

Argentinian official statistics reveal that in 2019, there were 131 universities with 66 public institutions, 63 private non-profit organisations and two foreign universities. Also in 2019, the estimated national population was 45 million inhabitants with 1,939,419 students enrolled in both undergraduate and graduate programmes; 78% of the student body was enrolled in public universities and 22% in private higher education organisations.

In 2019, 20 universities offered the undergraduate degree in public relations. For this total, two programmes were offered in public universities and 18 in private ones. This result places Argentina, together with the 56 undergraduate programmes of Brazil, as a leading regional player in public relations higher education.

Argentinian legislation establishes that the universities themselves should define the profile and scope of their public relations programmes. It is stated that the profile refers to the knowledge developed and acquired during the course, and the scope refers to the professional activities that a professional is capable of engaging. The 20 universities exercise a high degree of autonomy in determining what is appropriate in their curricula.

Given the regional relevance indicated above, we identified the need for in-depth research to verify general public relations approaches and theories adopted and used by Argentinian universities in their public relations undergraduate programmes.

The specific research question of the study is related to the identification of global general theoretical frameworks used by the main Argentinian universities offering undergraduate programmes in public relations.

General and overarching themes that facilitate a comprehensive analysis of these issues have been identified in the respective literature and are presented in the following sections. In the first one, we proceed to briefly discuss how the global field of public relations has evolved during the last four decades and to systematise the 15 most relevant general approaches and theories used in Argentinian higher education.

We have adopted the approach proposed by (Holtzhausen and Verwey, 1996) which states that in order for a theory to be considered as a general theory, ‘its explanation must
be general enough to cover a range of events beyond a single observation’ (p. 26), that is, it must be a ‘framework that includes all theoretical applications within a particular scientific domain’ (p. 27).

After presenting the methods used to collect and analyse the data, the findings of the study are presented from the perspective of seven key aspects of higher education that are understood to be related to the research question, namely: (1) purpose and impact of university education, (2) focus of disciplinary study, (3) curricula, (4) lecturer selection criteria, (5) bibliography, (6) theoretical constructs, and (7) research tradition.

In the discussion and conclusion section, we proceed to validate the fact that the selected Argentinian public relations programmes present a markedly professional character and a narrow use of general theories and approaches.

We also understand that this result represents a great challenge for Argentinian higher education in public relations, which is possibly extensive to the whole of Latin America: the lack of establishment of its own theoretical frameworks appropriate to the local and regional identity.

**Public relations as a global intellectual field**

The global intellectual domain of public relations has been dominated in the last decades by a functional paradigm created by James Grunig that has led to valuable contributions to both academia and professional practice. (Botan and Taylor, 2004), (Everett, 1993), (Half and Gregory, 2014, 2015), (L’Etang, 2005), (Pieczka, 2006), and (Xifra, 2003), among others, have referred to this functional approach as the dominant paradigm within the public relations field.

It is possible moreover to consider in (Kuhn, 1971) terms – that the prevalence of the paradigm during the preceding millennium may have hindered the production of differing theoretical perspectives. However, since the beginning of the first decade of this century, emerging theoretical developments have resulted in a socio-cultural intellectual turn (Edwards, 2012) and the broadening of disciplinary constructs that explain the structural phenomena of public relations as a discipline with organisational and social implications.

This collection has been published in English language, not only because it is the mother tongue of the academics who have contributed to it – and, according to (Suzina, 2021), the lingua franca within academia in general-but, above all, because scientific journals and publishers with specialised collections are usually of American or British origin. It is general knowledge, certainly not by chance, that English-speaking authors have been the most active in terms of research and publication in the field of public relations.

Indeed, as (Dühring, 2017) indicates, public relations literature was first developed in the USA, as were the first formal programmes of higher education, two or three decades earlier than in other regions of the world that include Western Europe and Latin America.

From this international perspective, it is clear that public relations was impacted to a greater extent by American authors, promoting – as (Kunsch, 2006) points out – a hegemony of thought, of epistemological and ontological assumptions, and of methodological approaches.

In this context, the contributions of J. Grunig have been crucial. This author, in fact, can be considered as the most relevant representative of the paradigm that seems to have prevailed in the theoretical scene for most of the previous 40 years.
(Grunig, 2006) recognised that his most ambitious project – the Excellence Study – was based on the integration of several medium-scale theories, such as the situational theory of publics and the two-way symmetrical model. The project led to the consolidation of a construct that serves as a general theory of public relations and is focused on the role of the profession in the strategic management of organisations.

This need for a general construct had already been embodied in Mary Ann Ferguson’s historic call in 1984 for the field to (one day) have a grand unified theory, ‘to crystallize a growing feeling of the field against the need for a unified identity, establishing a research agenda for academics to delineate a singular paradigm’ (Curtin, 2011 p. 33).

(Holtzhausen and Voto 2002) distinguish a modern view of the discipline as opposed to a postmodern one. ‘A modern approach to organisations privileges a management discourse and emphasizes the higher goals of the organisation as given and legitimate’ (p. 58), whose purpose is an ordered world with regulated conflicts, which has been accepted without examining the objectives of the organisation. According to the authors, this is the context in which many constructs are situated, including the Excellence Study, which ‘emphasizes the importance of public relations as a management function, its integration into the dominant coalition and strategic planning with measurable results, preferably in economic terms’ (p. 59).

A position similar to that of (Demetrious, 2013) for whom the domain ‘is limited in a paradigmatic way by the dominant worldviews that drive early modernity, and has not only actively closed new entry points to knowledge, but has exceeded them in narrow ideas, concepts and theories of knowledge’ (p. 31).

Meanwhile, (Fawkes, 2018) argues that competitive perspectives can be often seen within public relations academia and a certain disagreement and lack of communication between different approaches.

To this certain disagreement and lack of communication, public relations research has been criticised, according to (Dühring, 2015), for ‘its strong dependence on American models, concepts and theories and the ethnocentrism linked to it, lacking multiculturalism and awareness of the socio-cultural variability of the different regions of the world’ (p. 6). For Munshi (quoted in McKie, 2001), this context tends to consolidate the control of the domain in a Western cultural elite that prevents the progress of the much-declared multiculturalism, hindering attempts to decolonise the field on a global scale. Likewise, (Gregory and Halff, 2013) are concerned with the harmful hegemonic tendency of this sort of global construct, given that they can attempt against the diversity that reflects the disciplinary and professional reality of the field.

Consequently, it is possible to recognise an intellectual domain that has begun a process of change and openness, broadening the merely organisational reference on impact and implications of public relations, with topics of a socio-cultural nature that have been generating growing interest in the context of multiple academic conferences, publications and higher education programmes.

It is recognised that public relations have difficulties in achieving legitimacy, trust and recognition, for both its professional practice and academic domain and still ‘lacks a consistent body of knowledge that defines and demarcates the discipline’ (Dühring, 2015 p. 6).
Public relations continues ‘to seem more like a multidisciplinary field in which unrelated approaches from different disciplines are used to analyse public relations phenomena’ (Wehmeier, 2008 p. 223), an issue that aligns with the multi-paradigmatic field referred to by (Ilhen and van Ruler, 2009), (Toth, 2010), (Curtin, 2011).

Systematising theoretical approaches

The systematisation of 15 of the most relevant general approaches and theories of public relations was based on the classic division between functionalist, interpretative and critical currents or traditions (Bermejo-Berros, 2014) with the addition of the postmodern tradition due to its specific impact on the field.

The ordering strategy is the result of a literature review based on the Google Scholar citation criterion used until year 2019, where key concepts of each general construct, research tradition, founding text(s) and referent(s) are identified (see Table 1).

Of the 15 general constructs, seven approaches can be framed in the functionalist tradition and six in the interpretative, while both the critical and postmodern approaches have one construct each, with a crucial difference in the citation of foundational works.

The sum of the approaches related to functionalism accounts, as of 2019, 8451 citations; the interpretatives, 3017; the postmodern approach, 718; and the critical, 715. The identified theoretical references are consistent with those that (Sallot et al. 2003) had recognised in a study with similar implications. It is also important to note that only one construct is Latin American, specifically from Brazil.

Methods

To answer the research question related to the use of theoretical frameworks in the Argentinian public relations higher education system, the study had an exploratory nature, in which ‘data collection, analysis, interpretation, theory, all occur together, and this back and forth between data and theorization allows for the interactive generation of knowledge based on the data’ (Mendizábal, 2006 p. 68).

Five Argentinian universities with the largest undergraduate public relations student population were chosen, based on the influence they had on the total specific student population throughout the country. In that sense, it was conformed to a non-probabilistic sample, for convenience, of a strategic type (Igartua, 2006), selecting 5 universities (Universidad Empresarial Siglo 21, Universidad Nacional de La Matanza, Universidad Argentina de la Empresa, Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales and Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora) that together account for 67% of the public relations student population in Argentina, 5705 students out of a total of 8516.

Three types of printed institutional documents were examined: the curricula, to identify modules with a theoretical disciplinary component; the governmental resolutions that created each programme, which included the profile and scope definitions; and the syllabus associated with the theoretical modules.

The body of the study was approached from a qualitative perspective. A qualitative content analysis was carried out in order to ascertain the theoretical tradition promoted for
| Approach               | Key concept                  | Research tradition | Founding text/s (publication year and Google Scholar citation up to 2019)                                                                 | Main reference/s (country of origin) |
|------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Excellence study       | Symmetry, excellence         | Functionalist      | Managing public relations (1984, 5460). Excellence in PR and communication management (1992, 1121)                                    | James Grunig (USA)                   |
| Critical perspective   | Power, society               | Critical           | Critical perspectives in PR (1996, 159)                                                                                                 | Jacquie L’Etang (UK)                |
|                        |                              |                    | Public relations: Critical debates and contemporary practice (2006, 213)                                                                   |                                      |
|                        |                              |                    | Public relations: Concepts, practice and critique (2007, 343)                                                                               |                                      |
| Activist approach      | Organisational change        | Postmodern         | Postmodern values in PR (2000, 430)                                                                                                   | Derina Holtzhausen (South Africa)    |
|                        |                              |                    | Resistance from the margins: The postmodern PR practitioner as organisational activist (2002, 288)                                      |                                      |
| Rhetoric approach      | Rhetoric meaning             | Interpretative     | The wrangle in the marketplace: A rhetorical perspective of public relations (1992, 208)                                                | Robert Heath; Elizabeth Toth (USA)   |
| Fully functioning      | Social role                  | Functionalist      | Onward into more fog: Thoughts on public relations’ research directions (2006, 310)                                                       | Robert Heath (USA)                  |
| society                |                              |                    | Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to the study and practice of PR (2000, 589)                           | John Ledingham (USA)                |
| Relationship management| OPR                          | Functionalist      | Public relations and community. A reconstructed theory (1988, 311)                                                                     | Dean Kruckeberg; Kenneth Starck (USA) |
| theory                 |                              |                    | Feminist values in public relations (2000, 165)                                                                                         | Larissa Grunig; Elizabeth Toth;     |
|                        |                              |                    |                                                                                                                                        | Linda Hon (USA)                     |
| Dialogic theory        | Dialogue, ethics             | Interpretative     | Building dialogic relationships through the world wide web (1998, 1257)                                                                | Michael Kent; Maureen Taylor (USA)   |
| Community              | Community, meaning           | Interpretative     | Toward a dialogic theory of PR (2002, 1053)                                                                                             | Dean Kruckeberg; Kenneth Starck (USA) |
| theory                 |                              |                    | Public relations and community. A reconstructed theory (1988, 311)                                                                     |                                      |
| Feminist approach      | Gender, feminism             | Functionalist      | Feminist values in public relations (2000, 165)                                                                                         | Larissa Grunig; Elizabeth Toth;     |
|                        |                              |                    |                                                                                                                                        | Linda Hon (USA)                     |

(continued)
| Approach                        | Key concept                        | Research tradition | Founding text/s (publication year and Google Scholar citation up to 2019) | Main reference/s (country of origin) |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Reconstructive approach        | Communicative reconstruction, social reality | Interpretative | Public relations theory: The Reconstructive approach (2008, 69)              | Gunter Bentele (Germany)              |
| Contingency theory             | Defence, adaptation, conflict       | Functionalist      | It depends: A contingency theory of accommodation in PR (1997, 378)           | Amanda Cancel; Glen Cameron (USA)     |
| Strategic management approach  | Management strategy                | Functionalist      | Actions speak louder than words: How a strategic management approach to PR can shape a Company’s brand and reputation through relationships (2013, 24) | Jeong-Nam Kim (South Korea)          |
| Neo-institutional perspective  | Institutionalisation, legitimacy    | Interpretative     | Public relations and neo-institutional theory (2013, 47)                     | Magnus Fredriksson (Sweden); Finn Frandsen (Denmark) |
| Complexity theory              | Complex systems                     | Interpretative     | Implications of complexity theory for public relations, beyond crisis (2010, 35) | Priscilla Murphy (USA); Howard Nothhaft, Stefan Wehmeier (Germany) |
| Political function theory      | Legitimacy, conflict                | Functionalist      | Relações públicas: Função Política (1984, 404)                              | Roberto Porto Simões (Brazil)         |

OPR: organisation-public relationships; PR: Public relations.
each programme. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with course leaders, in which ‘topics and hypotheses selected prior to their application’ are used (De Miguel, 2005 p. 253). Finally, a structured survey was carried out on the 28 module leaders to help identify the theoretical choices they had made.

For (Aruguete, 2012), content analysis admits a qualitative approach. From there, the focus was to analyse the presence or absence of a certain feature of the content, in a certain fragment of the message. In this study, a non-frequency content analysis was done, whose selected sampling units were the programmes of the five selected universities. The reference units for the analyses were the ministerial resolutions that determine the profile and scope of each of the five courses, together with the 2018 syllabus of the theoretical modules with specific theoretical loading. The context units were the universities that offer public relations programmes.

Following (Igartua, 2006), the next step was to define the variables, specifying which characteristics of the messages were interesting to investigate, that is, the critical variables. The chosen variables were the number of theoretical modules, the purpose of the discipline, the object of study, the origin of the bibliography, the use of textbooks and the research tradition promoted.

In-depth interviews were conducted to understand the different points of view regarding the selection, use and promotion of certain theoretical perspectives in the selected programmes. These semi-structured interviews were conducted, with open-response questions or topics based on the questionnaire guide, with public relations course leaders of the five chosen universities.

The main purpose of the interviews moreover was to ascertain opinions (though testimonials) regarding theoretical constructs in public relations, the relevance of their use and which specific theories were utilised in the programmes.

The interview schedule was based on five axes: (1) Academic experience and professional training, (2) general functions of theory, (3) characteristics of curriculum design, (4) selection of lecturers and disciplinary literature and (5) research.

For analysis criteria, the transcripts were compared and contrasted with the collected data. Most relevant aspects were singled out and tabulated according to the research question in core to establish patterns based on the keywords or concepts identified.

In order to understand the causes that led lecturers to select certain theoretical disciplinary frameworks in the taught subjects, a qualitative perspective was used to examine the questionnaire. For (Jansen, 2012), this qualitative survey instrument serves to analyse the diversity of member characteristics in a predefined, semi-open or totally open manner.

The questionnaire included closed and semi-open questions, combining dichotomous, multiple choice and Likert scales. It was made up of three sections-demographic information, opinion on the intellectual domain and the role of the disciplinary theory. The questionnaire was administered to 28 lecturers, 80% of whom had 11 or more years of teaching experience.

Prior to the application, a pilot was conducted with five lecturers of similar modules from other universities not included in the sample to analyse the effectiveness of the questionnaire and verify whether the participants had interpreted the meaning of the questions in the way they had been intended when they were formulated. The resulting
questionnaire was administered online during March and April 2019, through the use of Survey Monkey. The response rate was 53.57%.

**Findings**

The results are presented in the context of the seven key aspects, namely: (1) Purpose and impact of university education, (2) object of disciplinary study promoted, (3) curricula, (4) lecturers selection criteria, (5) use of bibliography, (6) theoretical constructions and (7) research tradition.

**Purpose and impact of university education**

On the main purpose of higher education, it was revealed that serving professional practice appeared as the structuring principle, both in the survey carried out with the module leaders (12 of 15 agree or strongly agree) and in the interviews conducted programme leaders:

> As for the general purpose of our university education, we take everything to campaigns and how large companies can put together a communication plan that has a theoretical basis and also has a structure of objectives, strategies, and public relations tactics (course leader 1).

During the interviews, a preference for the programme leaders to refer to the professional practice in exclusively corporate environments was evidenced. Governmental or social sector organisations were not mentioned.

The content analysis for this variable revealed that the organisational role prevailed in the five programmes. However, when asked about the impact of the professional practice, just two surveyed lecturers chose organisational only, while the remaining 15 lecturers stated that the impact was both on an organisational and on a social scale.

**Object of study promoted**

The object of study, a phenomenon especially ‘studied by a disciplinary field, that is to say, the determined and distinctive way of investigating a given material or immaterial reality’ (Sadi, 2014 p. 34) is a relevant aspect because of its epistemological value and the references it can provide about metatheoretical and theoretical choices.

Content analysis for the documentation referring to the scope of the programmes – those activities that a professional can perform based on acquired knowledge – revealed that for two instances, the object was an organisational image or reputation. In the remaining two instances, the object was communication strategies. In the final instance, the object was organisation-public relationships (OPR). The generation of trust, dialogue on a social scale or organisational sustainability (Sadi, 2014) was not evident.

The interviews with course leaders (that included a specific question for this topic) revealed, for the most part, similar results to those revealed in content analysis, as it can be seen from one of the testimonials:
Public relations have a distinctive feature in relation to other programmes and that is the relationships. That is why some people must place it within the social sphere, but for me the social sphere doesn’t make any sense if it doesn’t have strong support for something concrete, which is communication, and I think that is the distinctive feature, the relationship management with publics (course leader 4).

These findings evidence that public relations teaching in Argentinian universities employed a theoretical framework based on the functionalist tradition.

**Curricula**

Content analysis for number of specific theoretical modules revealed that three of the five programmes had a low proportion of modules with public relations theoretical content (up to 5) on the total number of modules. The two remaining programmes revealed an average number of modules (between 6 and 10).

None of the chosen universities had more than 10 specific theoretical modules in their curricula. Only one course had a specific module specially designed for disciplinary theory. An average of 40 modules need to be taken and completed by the students during 4 years of study.

As for the testimonials of course leaders, the findings revealed in the content analysis coincided. One of them pointed out that ‘as far as I could, I tried to orient it towards the requirements of the market, despite recognizing the difficulty of any change of curricula’ (course leader 5).

The testimonials of programme leaders highlighted a functionalist approach, and a preference for students to quickly carry out internships or placements immersed in the professional market, in line with the requirements and career expectations.

**Lecturer selection criteria**

The lecturer selection criteria for modules with a specific theoretical load revealed that three programme leaders gave great relevance to the professional experience that these lecturers had, evidencing that they encouraged a more practical approach in those modules.

Public relations lecturers in Argentina are usually hired and paid per hour of class taught. There is practically an almost complete absence of full-time academics in the 20 universities that offer the course in Argentina. The lack of real encouragement or facilities for research and publications are additional factors to be taken into account.

In this context, there was a marked preference for hiring professionals to take over these modules:

It is very important for the university what they have done at the corporate level. If there is a lecturer who is a reference in industry, who works in or owns a consulting firm, and does not have the necessary qualification, he is also part of our school because that daily experience brings the balance we want to seek in our curricula (course leader 3).
Bibliography

Regarding the bibliography used in the selected modules, all 15 lecturers opted for books. 11 lecturers included journal articles, eight newspapers, eight popular magazines articles and three blogs.

The analysis of module content revealed that textbooks were the predominant compulsory bibliography in the majority of them, which can show a certain functionalist bias of the specific modules, above all because those most used (for example, Wilcox et al., 2006; Lattimore et al., 2008) were American books, written in English and translated into Spanish, and which mainly responded to a theoretical tradition linked to the predominant construct in matters of citation, the excellent theory.

Another relevant feature was the utilisation of English-language bibliography, given the fact that there is no substantial literature focused on public relations theories that has been written in Spanish. Only five lecturers confirmed the use of English-language bibliography in their modules.

When the 10 remaining lecturers that did not use English-language bibliography were asked why they did not do so, five indicated that the available Spanish language literature was sufficient for their purposes. Four lecturers indicated that students did not have adequate English-language reading comprehension. One lecturer indicated that the university did not allow the use of English-language bibliography. Another lecturer acknowledged that he himself was not fluent in English.

For compulsory reading materials, three of the five universities did not use English-language texts. For the remaining two universities, English-language bibliography constituted (for one university) less than 10% of total references. For the other university, English-language bibliography represented between 10 and 20% of total references.

Meanwhile, one university evidenced a greater use of English-language bibliography, due to a Public Relations Society of America’s certification that was granted to its course and the fact that:

Nowadays, a professional who does not know English well is practically out of the market. Students who have more advanced English skills see professional public relations terminology. And the student who has the ability to speak English, is already studying in English (course leader 3).

Despite the preference for English-language bibliographies and the PRSA certification, the total number of materials used by this university ranged between 10 and 20%.

Theoretical constructs

The course leaders expressed similar opinions regarding the essential role of theory in public relations:

As a basis for the education of any professional, everything that has to do with conceptual issues is fundamental to be able to make a transfer in the professional practice (course leader 5).
As far as the domain is concerned, only seven lecturers reported that they fully or fairly agreed that the discipline, since 1980, had developed a significant number of global theories. When asked about the theorists with whom they worked, 10 lecturers indicated J. Grunig; four, Porto Simões; two, L’Etang; two, Holtzhausen; and one, Heath. It is worth noting that for all the English-speaking authors referred to (J. Grunig, L’Etang and Holtzhausen), their textbooks had been translated to Spanish.

This result was consistent with the syllabus analysis, in which most of the references written by or linked to J. Grunig were verified.

The reference to the USA as the leading country in theoretical development was also supported by one of the course leaders:

We work here from the basic ones, those known by all, and it is evolving considering what the PRSA asks us for. The theoretical developments are taking place in the USA. We start by looking at the four Grunig models and then move on to the latest trends. And these latest trends are updated every four months, and lecturers from the USA also come to share these theoretical advances with the students (course leader 3).

This was a testimonial that matched that of another colleague, for whom:

The backbone was all Grunig’s work, going through the situational theory of publics, all Grunig’s conception of public affairs and corporate affairs (course leader 1).

**Research tradition**

One of the content analysis’ variables was the research tradition that each of the five courses preferably promoted: functionalist, interpretative, critical, postmodern or none clearly identifiable.

The variable measurement was developed from the divisible references in the definition of the courses’ profile and scope, and in the justification, objectives and units of contents of the modules.

The functionalist tradition prevailed in all the five programmes because it was possible to visualise the consideration given to public relations as an instrument at the service of organisational objectives, given that its main interest was the determination of the optimal way to manage communication and contribute to organisational effectiveness and efficiency.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The findings of this study indicate the need to address some relevant issues.

First, the service to professional practice, which appeared as the prevailing purpose of the discipline, goes back to the call made by (Dozier and Lauzen, 2000), who stated that public relations must be freed from just a practical dependence and aspire to a more active approach, not merely linked to the organisational benefit, but to a more inclusive one about the true impact to organisations in their internal and social environment.
This seems to be a faithful reflection of the fact that Argentinian public relations programmes have a predilection for training practitioners who are desirable in the job market. Any other purpose than honouring this predilection can be assumed as a risky challenge in terms of, for instance, student enrolment—an understandable situation given the financial sourcing for these 20 universities. In fact, 18 of them do not receive any state or public contribution and depend almost entirely on students’ fee payment (unlike public universities, which are fully state funded with no tuition from students).

This fact is aggravated in an Argentinian context characterised by recurrent crises, leading to the pauperisation of the labour market and the urgent need to raise funds for subsistence. Therefore, public relations programmes cannot afford to think about anything other than building the necessary technical skills in their graduates.

Second, the approach to the object of study reveals a functionalist-oriented condition in the case of the objects proposed in three programmes. Two courses—when referring to communication strategies—present a link with (Kim et al.’s 2013) strategic management of public relations theory and another one—referring to OPR—with (Ledingham’s 2003) relational theory. Both approaches notwithstanding are consistent with the functionalist approach.

The five objects of study are aspects or elements focused exclusively on organisational problems. Interviews with course leaders ratify this dimension and reveal a validation of aspects only focused on the reality of organisations and the contribution to their management and governance.

Third, regarding the theoretical loading of the curricula, three programmes have a low proportion of modules with specific theoretical content, while the two remaining programmes present an average one. None of the courses records a quantity measured as high in its specific grids. The testimonials of course leaders also highlight the functionalist approach.

Fourth, beyond the fact that the reasons given by the course leaders for the null or scarce use of English literature are valid (especially when the low reading comprehension in that language of most of the students is considered), the positive response given by the lecturers to the question referring to their agreement with the bibliography at their disposal—all or almost all of it in Spanish language—is sufficient to work without inconvenience on the public relations theories in their modules, is somewhat paradoxical, especially due to the fact that specific theoretical production in the Spanish language has been scarce.

As for the theories addressed at the universities, except for J. Grunig, and to a much lesser extent Porto Simões, L’Etang and Holtzhausen, most of the theorists systematised in this study do not appear.

It is also worth noting the testimonial of a course leader on the fact that theoretical developments take place in the USA, an aspect which is evidenced in a different way in this study, considering that only eight of the 15 general constructs originated in that country.

Finally, for research tradition, the data collected is aligned with an approach to public relations as a strategic activity of organisations that contributes to the achievement of objectives and assumes a rational and instrumental perspective of them as mere economic entities.
For all the above, based on the limited use of the diverse approaches systematised and in response to the research question that is discussed in this article, enough evidence has been found to conclude that the selected undergraduate public relations programmes prefer theoretical frameworks linked to the functionalist tradition, in particular J. Grunig’s Excellence Theory. From this evidence, Argentinian higher education presents a markedly professional character, an aspect that can contribute to justifying the monochordist disciplinary theoretical load that has become evident.

In Argentina, as is often the case in Latin America, public relations have been mainly approached as a field of professional practice. The contributions to the intellectual domain are on a less visible plane, unlike in the countries of the Global North, which have managed to build multiple theories, models and concepts of various kinds. This confines the field to being a rather technical field, which forms the mere training of capable professionals and only in line with market expectations, affecting its legitimacy as an academic discipline.

In what can be considered a vicious circle, the absence of local public relations theories related to its own culture, idiosyncrasy and values favours the adoption by higher education programmes of imported theories translated into Spanish, theories that have been no more than a scarce number of the total of constructs generated in recent decades.

Due to national regulations that favour some disciplines and programmes over others, the budget that universities allocate to undergraduate degree programmes, such as public relations, is negatively affected and promotes undesirable situations. These situations are evidenced by the fact that almost all the public relations academic staff are hourly paid, with no full-time academics having the facilities and incentives to research, publish and share their findings.

The obvious consequence is the difficulty for academia to develop scientific studies leading to local or regional matrices and theories, approaches that could more precisely answer general questions about the phenomenon of public relations in Argentina and the Latin American region.

This is the greatest challenge and need for higher education in public relations in Argentina. There is an important need to generate, progressively, the conditions for academics to begin to establish the disciplinary theoretical frameworks appropriate to the conditions in which professional practice is developed. In other words, their development should focus on the analysis of diverse research traditions in the search for constructs with identity and affinity with local conditions.

**Originality and limitations of the study**

This study is believed to be the first to explore in detail the use of public relations theoretical frameworks in the Argentinian higher education system. It is also believed that its results could promote new research regarding public relations pedagogy on an Argentinian or Latin American perspective. Pertinent new research lines could address the role that disciplinary theory has, has had or should have in the teaching and learning processes, or could provide valuable input for lecturers to broaden the theoretical basis for their specific modules.
The main limitation of this study is the use of convenience sample, based on the influence that five selected universities have on the total population of public relations undergraduate students throughout Argentina. Hence, the results cannot be generalised to the remaining 15 national programmes. Beyond that limitation, this study could be useful for other researchers who (in the future) can employ representative samples to obtain results that can be generalised to the total population or for cross-country comparative research initiatives.

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