

International public relations in Colombian *multilatinas* firms

Relaciones públicas internacionales en las empresas multilatinas colombianas

Relações públicas internacionais nas empresas colombianas multilatinas

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ABSTRACT | Transnational corporations (TNCs) originating in Latin America, known as *multilatinas*, had learn to mediate their public relations strategies between home and host companies. To analyze the role that these relationship strategies play in the communication of Colombian *multilatinas*, we conducted a Delphi analysis with 20 experts among Latin American professionals and academics, as well as a structured survey with 24 communication directors (dircom) of this type of organizations in Colombia in 2021. The role of international public relations was described in a South-South dialogic perspective. The identification of the interests of international stakeholders and the strategic link between headquarters and subsidiaries for the appropriate positioning of Colombian organizations abroad were the main findings for the panel of experts while, for the dircom, corporate reputation management was considered as the most important relationship strategy with which companies position themselves in the different countries where they have an international presence.

KEYWORDS: international public relations; strategic communication; corporate communication; *multilatinas*; dircom; Delphi method.

FORMA DE CITAR

Giraldo-Dávila, A.F.(2024). Relaciones públicas internacionales en las empresas multilatinas colombianas. *Cuadernos.info*, (59), 324-348. <https://doi.org/10.7764/cdi.59.68713>

RESUMEN | *Denominadas multilatinas, las corporaciones transnacionales (CTN) con origen en América Latina han tenido que aprender a comunicar sus estrategias de relaciones públicas entre la casa matriz (home) y las subsidiarias (host). Para analizar el rol que desempeñan estas estrategias de relacionamiento en la comunicación de las multilatinas colombianas, se llevó a cabo un análisis Delphi con 20 expertos entre profesionales y académicos latinoamericanos, así como una encuesta estructurada con 24 directores de comunicación (dircom) de este tipo de organizaciones en Colombia en 2021. El papel de las relaciones públicas internacionales fue descrito bajo una perspectiva dialógica Sur - Sur. La identificación de los intereses de los stakeholders internacionales, así como la conexión estratégica entre casa matriz y filiales para el adecuado posicionamiento de las organizaciones colombianas en el exterior, constituyeron los hallazgos más significativos para el panel de expertos, en tanto que para los dircom, la gestión de la reputación corporativa fue considerada como la principal estrategia de relacionamiento que tienen las empresas para posicionarse en los distintos países donde tienen presencia internacional.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *relaciones públicas internacionales; comunicación estratégica; comunicación corporativa; multilatinas; dircom; método Delphi.*

RESUMO | *Conhecidas como multilatinas, as corporações transnacionais (CTNs) originárias da América Latina tiveram de aprender a comunicar suas estratégias de relações públicas entre as empresas matrizes e as anfitriãs. Para analisar o papel desempenhado por essas estratégias de relacionamento na comunicação das multilatinas colombianas, foi realizada uma análise Delphi com 20 especialistas entre profissionais e acadêmicos latino-americanos, bem como uma pesquisa estruturada com 24 diretores de comunicação (Dircom) desse tipo de organização na Colômbia no ano de 2021. Foram traçadas linhas descritivas em torno do papel desempenhado pelos processos de relações públicas internacionais a partir de uma perspectiva dialógica sul-sul. A identificação dos interesses das partes interessadas internacionais, bem como a conexão estratégica entre a matriz e as subsidiárias para o posicionamento adequado das organizações colombianas no exterior, constituíram as descobertas mais significativas para o painel de especialistas; enquanto, para os Dircom, a gestão da reputação corporativa foi considerada a principal estratégia de relacionamento que as empresas têm para se posicionar nos diferentes países onde têm presença internacional.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *relações públicas internacionais; comunicação estratégica; comunicação corporativa; multilatinas; dircom; método Delphi*

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to analyze the role of public relations for transnational corporations in the communication process between the home and host audiences (Andersson, 2024; Sarabdeep & Molleda, 2015; Bravo et al., 2013; Curtin & Gaither, 2007). The convergence between home and host countries makes transnational corporations (TNCs) an actor in the global North with power, influence and hegemony over the developing South (Kruckeberg, 2000; Minielli et al., 2021). As mentioned by Epley (1992): “Global public relations are local public relations” (p. 111). The relational success of a TNC is due to this global-local dynamic, as both home and host countries establish mutually beneficial public relations with stakeholders such as governments, trade unions, media and communities where the organization operates internationally (Molleda et al., 2005), but always with the national perspective under the concepts of theoretical blending (Marques de Melo, 1999) and adapted models (León-Duarte, 2002). This serves to project the strategic relationships of a TNC at a national and international level, making it possible to address global theories of communication management together with the local concepts of the implementation of unified actions by each country (Machado Casali, 2009). In this context, the term multilatinas emerged, a term that identifies the transnational corporations that have their headquarters in a Latin American country and their subsidiaries in the same region (Cuervo-Cazurra, 2016), under a figure of semi-globalization (Ghemawat, 2013) that improves South-South relations (Torrico-Villanueva, 2016). This requires international public relations to carry out its own analysis based on the specificities of the countries that come together in this geography (Contreras Delgado & Garibay Rendón, 2020).

Therefore, international public relations are regaining importance from a Latin American perspective. To the extent that their organizations are successful as multilatinas (Casilda Béjar, 2014), they are adapting to the regional context due to the affinity of their markets (Orjuela-Córdoba, 2015; Ángel Botero, 2013).

Theoretical framework

The influence of Anglo-Saxon public relations theory and practice in the Latin American context is characterized by the application of colonial processes to scientific knowledge (Sadi & Méndez, 2015), with the predominance of the positive factor that globalization has given to the strengthening of organizations and the postcolonial vision of considering the symbiosis between global multiculturalism and the socioeconomic contexts of the countries of the region (Molleda & Suárez, 2023). The challenge for TNCs in contexts such as Latin America is to reconcile their political-economic influence with interest groups that view this type of interference from an imperialist perspective. Therefore, the task of public relations is to harmonize this hierarchical and asymmetrical scenario in order to lead it to a

strategic and symmetrical understanding (Arzuaga-Williams, 2019; Ferrari, 2011). Stakeholders of a subsidiary must have confidence in the arrival of foreign capital and see it as a mutual benefit for the well-being of communities (Pradana, 2024). For multilaterales, measuring the impact that companies have on local communities becomes a reputational value (Arzuaga Williams et al., 2024).

From a global public relations perspective, the influx of foreign direct investment is gaining renewed interest due to the democratic changes in the Latin American environment (Lee et al., 2023), where it is crucial to consolidate the good health of international business. Therefore, transnational corporations have had to strengthen their institutional relationships with governments both at headquarters and in the countries where they have subsidiaries, strengthen the company's reputation on several regional fronts (Labarca & Sadi, 2022), strategically align the organization and its communication processes (Álvarez-Nobell et al., 2022), and, finally, ensure the security of investments through adequate management of local communities, taking into account the cultural considerations involved (Moreno et al., 2022).

Multilaterales have an integrative vision of international public relations theory because they have given organizational communication, corporate communication and public relations (Guillén et al., 2017; Rebeil & Arévalo, 2017) a combination with the Anglo-Saxon and American visions that govern the discussion of the strategic and tactical (Suárez-Monsalve, 2022), since the size of the organization and its economic resources determine the relational model used (Krohling-Kunsch, 2012, 2014), especially when Latin American TNCs do not represent more than 10% of the total economic structure (Maloney et al., 2024). This leads to the following four theoretical propositions (Giraldo-Dávila, 2020, 2022), marked with the letter P, which will be the focus of this study to analyze the international public relations of TNCs and their applicability in multilaterales:

P1. There is a link between the global and the local to connect identity, image and corporate brand in a cross-cultural environment.

P2. The public relations strategy is driven from home, but hosts are given some autonomy in its implementation.

P3. TNCs' expansion is guided from start to finish by an international PR plan that connects the needs between the home country and the respective host country.

P4. Reputation, crises and brands occupy the entire TNC equally, even when they occur in a local host country.

The general objective of the research was to analyze the role of international public relations in the Colombian multilatinas environment and its contribution to the field from a Latin American perspective. Subsequently, the following specific objectives were defined (SO):

SO1. Conceptualize international outreach in Latin American TNCs through a Delphi study targeting Latin American professionals and academics.

SO2. Survey of communication managers of Colombian multilatinas companies to review international public relations between headquarters and the respective subsidiaries.

SO3. Determine if there is a theoretical Latin American contribution to international public relations based on the analysis of the relational processes of Colombian multilatinas.

This question is relevant to the current Latin American context due to the political changes that democracies in general, but especially the Colombian one, have undergone. This invites to reflect on the role of public relations in contexts of excessive political polarization (Howard, 2022) and uncertainty due to macroeconomic stability, as seen in Colombia since 2022. However, foreign direct investment from Latin America has increased in 2023 thanks to the multilatinas (Blanco Estévez, 2024). Given this situation, our guiding questions are as follows: What is the impact of the multilatinas' public relations when they expand their investments in national contexts that are in constant political flux? How important is the image of the multilatinas' country of origin as a source of capital investment in the countries in which they choose to invest? To what extent does international public relations work help to adapt the corporate culture of the country of origin (headquarters) to the diverse contexts in which the respective hosts operate?

METHODOLOGY

In the absence of a precise study on which Colombian companies are classified as multilatinas, a special report from *Semana* magazine on the 1,000 most important companies in Colombia¹ was taken into account, using the criterion of international presence with a production plant, a commercial branch or a number

1. . Between June and August 2018, the websites of the 100 companies listed in this report published by *Semana* magazine were reviewed individually to determine which companies have an international presence in one or more countries. Updated in 2021 (Ranking de las 100 empresas más grandes de Colombia y las 900 siguientes, 2021).

of employees in at least one country other than Colombia (Cuervo-Cazurra, 2016). Fifty Multilatinas organizations were identified and classified according to their position in the ranking, the economic sector to which the consortium belongs, the Colombian city in which the headquarters is located and the number of countries with an international presence. Table 1 illustrates how Colombian companies have diversified and expanded their markets abroad, in economic sectors such as the food industry, public services management, infrastructure projects, the energy and hydrocarbons sector, airlines, mining, chemicals and finance. These TNCs are expanding mainly in South America, Central America and the Caribbean, due to the internationalization of competition, macroeconomic stability, the confidence of the authorities and the strengthening of the Colombian diaspora abroad (Veléz Ocampo & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016). Large national companies underwent a slow but progressive metamorphosis into multilaterales due to a changing environment following the market reforms in the 1990s, which led to growth in Colombia's domestic product and that of each country in which the companies operate.

| Number | Name | Col Ranking | Sector | Headquarters | # of |
|--------|----------------|-------------|------------------------------------|--------------|------|
| 1 | Ecopetrol | 1 | Oil and gas | Bogotá | 4 |
| 2 | Éxito | 2 | Mass consumption | Medellín | 3 |
| 3 | Terpel | 3 | Fuels, lubricants, petrochemicals | Bogotá | 5 |
| 4 | EPM | 4 | Public services | Medellín | 5 |
| 5 | Avianca | 5 | Transportation and logistics | Bogotá | 4 |
| 6 | Grupo Nutresa | 8 | Food | Medellín | 14 |
| 7 | Cementos Argos | 9 | Cement | Medellín | 11 |
| 8 | ISA | 13 | Public services | Medellín | 12 |
| 9 | GEB | 30 | Public services | Bogotá | 3 |
| 10 | Promigas | 40 | Public services | Barranquilla | 1 |
| 11 | Carvajal | 41 | Graphic industry and services | Cali | 10 |
| 12 | Celsia | 43 | Public services | Medellín | 3 |
| 13 | Familia | 60 | Personal care and hygiene products | Medellín | 3 |
| 14 | Quala | 73 | Food | Bogotá | 8 |
| 15 | Alpina | 77 | Food | Bogotá | 2 |
| 16 | Colombina | 78 | Food | Cali | 2 |
| 17 | Manuelita | 114 | Sugar | Cali | 3 |
| 18 | Concreto | 122 | Infrastructure | Medellín | 2 |

Tabla 1 - Continúa ▶

| | | | | | |
|----|----------------------|-----|------------------------------------|--------------|----|
| 19 | Ternium | 132 | Construction material | Medellín | 5 |
| 20 | Tecnoglass | 138 | Construction material | Barranquilla | 7 |
| 21 | Procaps | 169 | Pharmaceuticals | Barranquilla | 8 |
| 22 | Mineros | 192 | Mining | Medellín | 3 |
| 23 | Odinsa | 196 | Infrastructure | Bogotá | 3 |
| 24 | Luker Chocolate | 199 | Food | Manizales | 5 |
| 25 | Crystal | 214 | Textiles and manufacturing | Medellín | 2 |
| 26 | AlianzaTeam Foods | 221 | Food | Bogotá | 2 |
| 27 | Brinsa | 299 | Paint and chemicals | Bogotá | 2 |
| 28 | Levapan | 316 | Food | Bogotá | 4 |
| 29 | Pintuco | 324 | Paint and chemicals | Medellín | 8 |
| 30 | Cueros Vélez | 351 | Leather goods | Medellín | 7 |
| 31 | Arclad | 416 | Materials for graphic arts | Medellín | 9 |
| 32 | Andercol | 468 | Paint and chemicals | Medellín | 4 |
| 33 | Premex | 481 | Food | Medellín | 5 |
| 34 | Conalvías | 482 | Infrastructure | Cali | 3 |
| 35 | Procafecol | 487 | Food | Bogotá | 3 |
| 36 | Decameron | 496 | Hospitality and tourism | Cartagena | 8 |
| 37 | Estelar | 517 | Hospitality and tourism | Bogotá | 2 |
| 38 | Yupi | 625 | Food | Cali | 1 |
| 39 | PQP | 639 | Paint and chemicals | Medellín | 2 |
| 40 | Gerfor | 673 | Pipes and PVC | Medellín | 4 |
| 41 | Aldor | 684 | Food | Cali | 4 |
| 42 | La Sante | 700 | Pharmaceuticals | Bogotá | 7 |
| 43 | Laboratorios Chalver | 881 | Pharmaceuticals | Bogotá | 11 |
| 44 | Corona Locería | 986 | Textiles and manufacturing | Bogotá | 7 |
| 45 | Larkin | S/I | Personal care and hygiene products | Bogotá | 6 |
| 46 | Bancolombia | S/I | Financial | Medellín | 3 |
| 47 | GNB Sudameris | S/I | Financial | Bogotá | 2 |
| 48 | Banco Davivienda | S/I | Financial | Bogotá | 5 |
| 49 | Grupo Aval | S/I | Financial | Bogotá | 6 |
| 50 | Grupo Sura | S/I | Insurance and investments | Medellín | 10 |

Table 1. Colombian multilaterals: ranking, economic sector and countries in which they operate

Source: Own elaboration based on Semana (2021).

The first method used was a Delphi analysis with a group of 20 experts – out of the 50 originally contacted. Among them were Latin American PR professionals and academics who, in three cyclical rounds from June to August 2021, defined the general objective of the research and weighed the proposals of the theoretical framework. Between September and November, a closed survey was sent by email to each of the 50 communication managers of the selected multi-Latin American companies; 24 responded, so the degree of representativeness was 48% of the total sample ($p=50$, $r= 0.48/1$).

Expert panel using the Delphi method

This method focuses on building a panel of experts to help solve a largely unexplored problem by conducting several rounds that the researcher determines with the group (Chou, 2002). In strategic communication, this tool is useful to strengthen the field of public relations in transnational organizations (Jain, 2009), as it is a quick way to examine the competencies associated with the professional practices and sources of work of professionals in this discipline. A base of 20 panelists was formed with a broad representation of Latin American countries, taking into account criteria such as geographical diversity and professional or academic experience (López-Gómez, 2018). Table 2 describes the background of each member of the expert panel, who came from both Latin American companies and universities, and with whom three rounds of interviews were conducted between June and August 2002, with one month between each cycle. A methodological process was followed to cover the research phases quickly and effectively: the central objective of the research in Round 1, the empirical definitions of the proposed theories in Round 2 and the conclusion of the study in Round 3 (Astigarraga, 2008). The instruments were approved by the university's ethics committee.

- a. Round 1 (from 01-06-2021 to 30-06-2021). What role should international public relations play in the processes that Latin American TNCs have between the parent company and their respective subsidiaries? Multiple choice with a single answer from five options.
- b. Round 2 (from 01-07-2021 to 31-07-2021). The 20 experts weighted the four theoretical propositions using a Likert scale, with 0 being not very important and 5 being very important for the Latin American approach to international public relations.
- c. Round 3 (from 01-08-2021 to 31-08-2021). General conclusion of the study. The panel drew a conclusion from the research by selecting a key word after agreeing with the results of the previous two rounds.

| Expert | Country | Economic sector | Position | Education level |
|--------|---------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Colombia | Education | Professor | Master |
| 2 | Bolivia | Multinational | Head of customer service | Degree |
| 3 | Argentina | Multinational | Director of public affairs | Degree |
| 4 | Colombia | Education | Professor | Master |
| 5 | Colombia | Education | Professor | Doctoral |
| 6 | Colombia | Private company | CEO | Master |
| 7 | Guatemala | Multinational | Strategic management | Doctoral |
| 8 | Colombia | Public entity | Communication analyst | Master |
| 9 | Colombia | Multinational | Digital transformation management | Degree |
| 10 | Peru | Education | Professor | Doctoral |
| 11 | Colombia | Multinational | Corporate management | Degree |
| 12 | Colombia | Education | Director and professor | Master |
| 13 | Colombia | Union | President | Master |
| 14 | United States | Education | Professor | Doctoral |
| 15 | Ecuador | Education | Director and professor | Doctoral |
| 16 | Colombia | Multinational | Commercial coordination | Degree |
| 17 | Colombia | Multinational | Training and development coordination | Degree |
| 18 | Colombia | Education | Professor | Master |
| 19 | Colombia | Private company | Human resources and corporate culture | Degree |
| 20 | Colombia | Multinational | External communications | Degree |

Table 2. Members of the expert panel for the implementation of the Delphi method

Source: Own elaboration.

Survey among the communication directors of the Colombian *multilaterales*

The survey is a systematic method to obtain data for a specific group to be studied through the question-answer dynamic (Salvador-Oliván et al., 2021) and which allows quantitative measurements to be obtained (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza-Torres, 2018). Using the time criteria for the application of a survey (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2020), the largest number of responses received within a three-month period between September and November 2021 was used as a window with which to measure the level of participation of the 50 *multilaterales* studied. Taking into account the ethics

protocols of the institution supporting the study, the 24 questionnaires were sent by email. Only the company, industry sector and position held were listed and the name and email address of the communications' directors who responded to the survey were omitted in order to preserve their anonymity and protect their informed of this when the survey was sent out.

| Participant | Company | Sector | Position |
|-------------|-------------|------------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Andercol | Paint | Director of communications |
| 2 | Arclad | Graphic arts industry | Director of communications |
| 3 | Argos | Cement | Director of internal communications |
| 4 | Avianca | Airlines | VP of corporate communications |
| 5 | Bancolombia | Finance | Reputation and communications management |
| 6 | Brinsa | Paint | Director of legal and communications |
| 7 | Carvajal | Graphic industry and services | Director of corporate communications |
| 8 | Concreto | Infrastructure | Coordinator of corporate communications |
| 9 | Corona | Tableware | Digital content and corporate communications |
| 10 | Davivienda | Finance | Director of marketing and advertising |
| 11 | Ecopetrol | Hydrocarbons | Head of external communications and press |
| 12 | EPM | Public services | Communications management |
| 13 | Éxito | Retail | VP of human resources |
| 14 | Familia | Personal care and hygiene products | Director of communications |
| 15 | GEB | Public services | Head of communications |
| 16 | ISA | Electric energy | Corporate communication management |
| 17 | Casa Lúker | Food | VP of marketing |
| 18 | Manuelita | Agroindustry | Coordinator of corporate communications |
| 19 | Mineros | Mining | Director of communications |
| 20 | Nutresa | Food | Corporate communications manager |
| 21 | Promigas | Public services | Corporate communications manager |
| 22 | SURA | Finance | Brand and communications management |
| 23 | Ternium | Steel | Head of marketing and communications |
| 24 | Terpel | Fuels, lubricants, petrochemicals | Corporate affairs management |

Table 3. Communication directors of Colombian companies that took part in the survey

Source: Own elaboration.

To implement the questionnaire, a pretest was conducted with five university professors from the field of public relations to measure whether they understood each element of the questionnaire (Padua et al., 2016). The result was a 97.3% agreement and a 2.7% bias. This prior piloting showed that the questionnaire could not take longer than two minutes to complete due to the profile of the respondents and for effective participation.

Similar to the Delphi panel experts, the first question for the communication directors focused on the general objective of the research using a Likert scale, the second focused on a dichotomous variable to measure the level of house-host relationship and the third was a multiple-choice question with a single answer to measure the importance of public relations when the company decides to expand internationally. The questionnaire was previously reviewed by five specialized university professors.

Question 1. Which of the following tasks should the parent company's public relations work have towards its international subsidiaries? Rank them in order of importance on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 5 is very important and 1 is not very important.

- a. Manage the company's reputation and achieve appropriate strategic positioning in another country.
- b. Promote the image of Colombia (national branding) by positioning the company in another country.
- c. Connect the communication strategies between the corporate headquarters and the respective international subsidiaries.
- d. Maintain a dialog with the media, communities, governments and influential people in the countries where the company is located.
- e. Conduct a context analysis for each country to understand the different cultures and implement communication strategies.

Question 2. Are the communication strategies planned from the head office or with the autonomy of the subsidiaries? YES— NO—

Question 3. What role should international public relations play at the time of the company's international expansion? Choose one option.

- a. It must already be part of the corporate architecture at the time of the foreign investment and accompany the company's entire expansion process.

- b. It must be implemented after the financial operation, as it is not considered a relevant function at the time of expansion.
- c. The area of communication for the international subsidiaries is not important and is managed from the head office.
- d. It is a process that is outsourced to a local agency to carry out specific actions and tasks for communication and local relations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

International public relations from a Latin American perspective from the Delphi panel

The three rounds conducted with the expert panel as part of the Delphi method can provide descriptive lines (O'Neil et al., 2018) on the performance of public relations in multilaterales corporations; as shown in figure 1, 42% of the panel considers that stakeholder identification is strategic for the multilateral company in that the interests of the different geographical regions in which the company is present can be known, followed by 26% who attach importance to the link between public relations and the company's macro strategy. In third place, with 21%, the experts consider that the link between headquarters and subsidiary is crucial, as it implies that the organization as a whole operates from its host country, but the adaptation to local contexts, which requires a higher level of relationship on the part of multilaterales, is in line with the 11% of opinions that agree with the multicultural parameter of a TNC. Finally, the concept of transnational reputation with 5%, is not yet considered a factor of first order despite the fact that the image of this type of organization is analyzed at a global level.

From the hegemonic perspective of the West, public relations have been characterized by its strategic focus on interest groups (Capriotti et al., 2021). However, the Delphi panel experts have pointed out that Latin American characteristics serve to identify more homogeneous interest groups in terms of traditions, history, common language and business practices. As indicated in the theoretical framework, multilaterales apply narrow globalization in their international public relations. Nevertheless, the expert panel supports the central objective of the research in Round 1 by noting that despite the prevailing theoretical currents, the Latin American context has its own nuances, such as national identity, common language, political polarization, and activism; variables that generate success or failure for TNCs that choose to invest in a particular country.

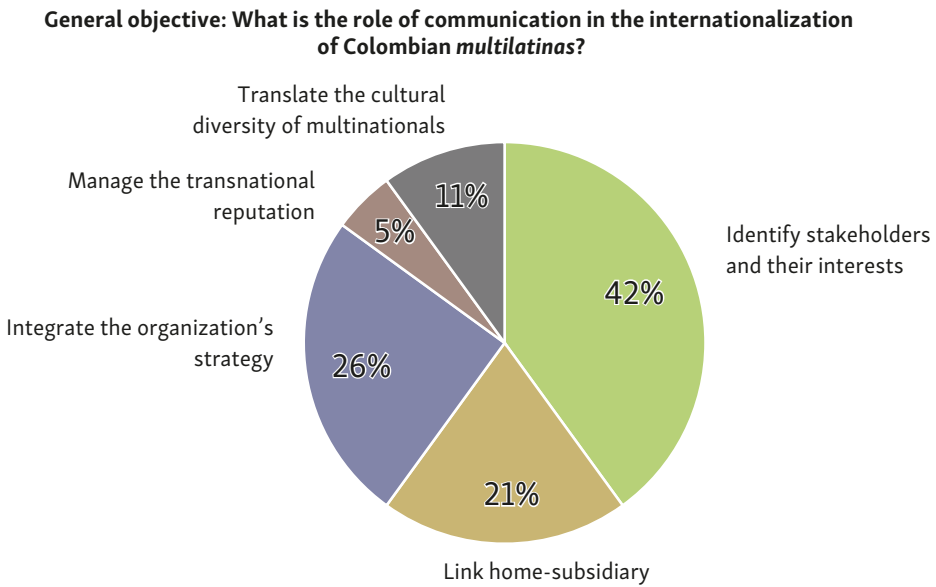


Figure 1. Round 1 response on the overall objective

Source: Own elaboration.

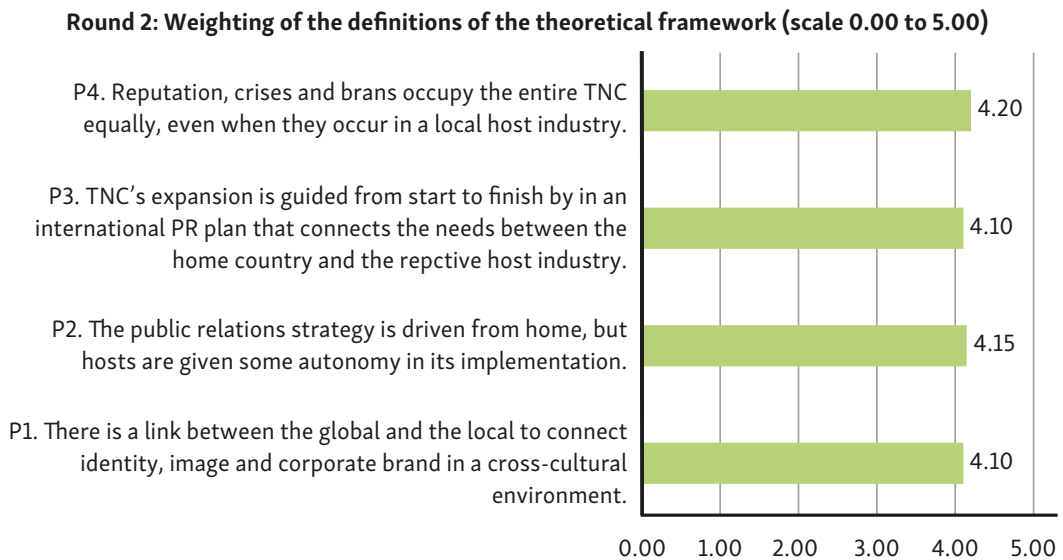


Figure 2. Weighting of the four theoretical proposals (scale 0 to 5) proposed by the Delphi panel experts in round 2

Source: Own elaboration.

In round 2 (figure 2), the experts considered that P4 was the best rated with a score of 4.20/5, as a company's reputation is closely linked to the group of *multilaterales* and crises equally jeopardize the transnational brand. However, as it is a South-South business relationship, the projection of the crisis is not as overwhelming.

It is followed by P2 with 4.15/5, where the experts believe that the *multilaterales* adopt a flexible standardization, especially because the private labels of certain products or services must preserve the local tradition. Locality in the management of the *multilaterales*' corporate communications is geared towards convergence. P1 and P3 had a similar rating (4.10/5): The Latin American panel sees communication as an important tool for relations in investments and building alliances between the home and host countries, given the intercultural environment despite the geographical proximity. The contribution of the experts in this round shows that the fact that the *multilaterales* have become transnational actors has led them to use the same strategies, although the theories have been developed for years in global scenarios, because the headquarters has understood that the reach of their host countries requires extensive decentralization in terms of public relations (Molleda et al., 2018). The international public relations of *multilaterales* combines what was established in rounds 1 and 2 in the sense that reputation is projected as a transnational good to specific stakeholders in each country, implying specific actions with control from the home country. Corporate reputation will persist as an intangible good for the corporate world (Orozco Toro et al., 2023).

In round 3, each expert was asked to conclude the research with a representative sentence from which seven key words related to the research topic were derived. Of these, three subgroups stand out as having a conceptual relationship: in the first case, strategy and strategic coincide; a second grouping consists of stakeholders, interest groups and audience; and thirdly, multiculturalism and host. Thus, the experts on the panel are faithful to the global vision of public relations as the strategic direction of corporate communication, because the audience is always in the orbit of this relationship. From the multicultural vision of international public relations for Latin America, the primacy of colonialist theories continues (Dutta & Elers, 2020).

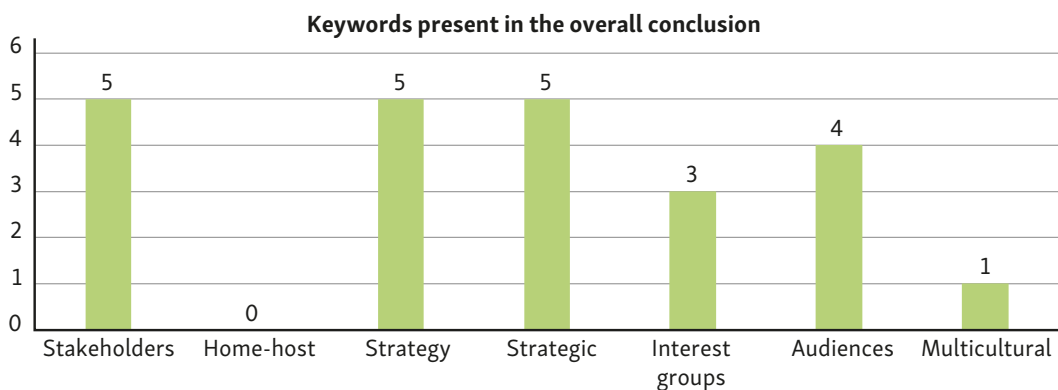


Figure 3. Round 3. Keywords found in the conclusions

Source: Own elaboration.

RESULTS FROM THE PERCEPTION OF THE COMMUNICATION DIRECTORS OF THE COLOMBIAN MULTILATINAS

On a scale of 1 to 5 –with 5 being the most important and 1 being the least important– respondents indicated that managing corporate reputation to achieve an appropriate strategic positioning in another country received a score of 3.73 (figure 4), putting this measure in first place in the process of transnational expansion. In second place is the connection of communication strategies between the parent company and its respective international subsidiaries with a score of 3.65, followed by conducting a context analysis of each country to understand the different cultures that enable the implementation of communication strategies with a score of 3.39. In fourth place is the dialog with the media, communities, governments and influential people in the countries where the company is located with a score of 2.82. In fifth place is the promotion of the image of Colombia through the positioning of the company in another country with a score of 2.04.

This ranking indicates that reputation is an essential value for communication directors in the internationalization process, as it paves the way for companies to engage in transnational scenarios. It underlines that the image of the country is not associated with that of the company and the approach within the work teams in this direction is nil. The interviewees indicated that the planning of the communication strategy between the headquarters and the subsidiaries takes place before the dialog with the most influential and closest target groups in the country of investment deposit.

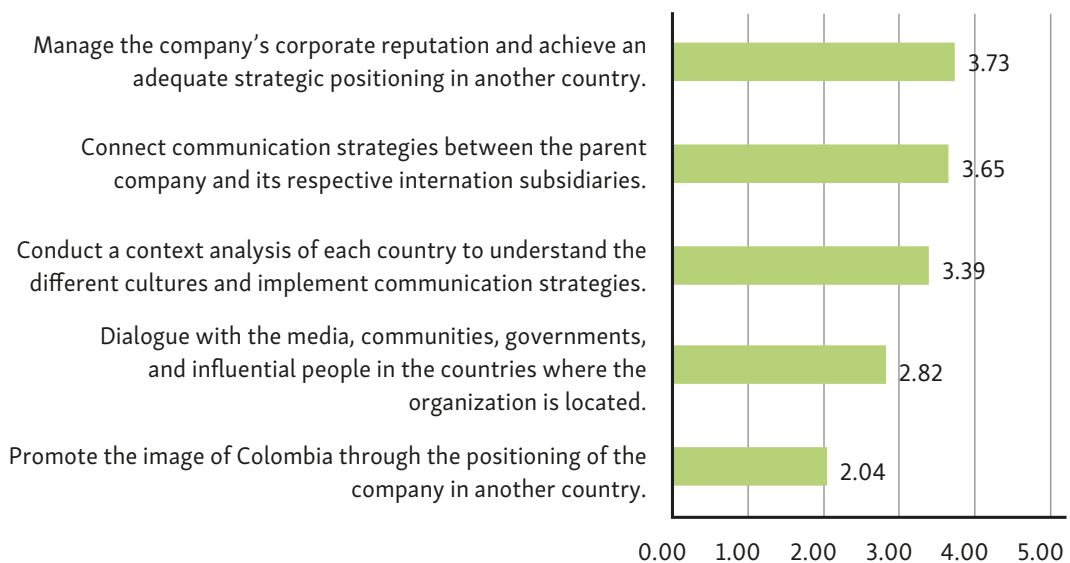


Figure 4. International public relations actions applied by the dircoms

Source: Own elaboration.

The country context is an intermediate step, often considered by dircoms as a first step, while sometimes it can be the last resort. The link between the image of the country of origin and the corporate brand remains weak, as some consider it counterproductive, since Colombian capital can carry stigmas that are completely foreign to the business world. Furthermore, national branding is more of a government responsibility than a business one and is a topic that has been little researched in the region.

On the other hand, 20 of the 24 respondents (figure 5) stated that the centralization of communication is essential for sharing cultural identity, brand management and unifying corporate narratives. Execution is then in the hands of the individual managers in the respective subsidiaries, who adapt the public relations strategies to the specific needs of their environment, especially because the target groups are the same in name but differ in their characterization. There were only four dircoms' opposite answers, as communication with the company headquarters is not structured. The success of transnational corporations can lead to communication being neglected because its importance is ignored or because the brands acquired in the subsidiaries do not want to be controlled by another country when it comes to such sensitive aspects as communication and stakeholder relations.



Figure 5. Public relations strategies planned at head office, giving subsidiaries autonomy to adapt strategies to their context

Source: Own elaboration.

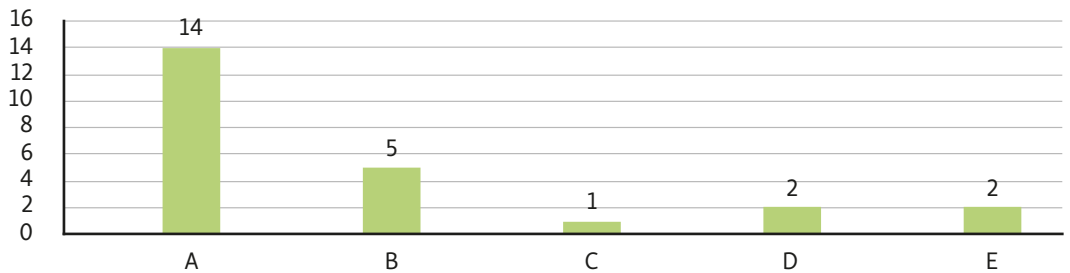


Figure 6. Focus on the public relations strategy when the company expands its business abroad

Source: Own elaboration.

Finally, figure 6 shows that in 14 *multilaterales*, the relationship process went hand in hand with the capital investment, as international public relations is essential for positioning the brand with the various stakeholders of a host country. Foreign direct investment requires communication planning as part of the corporate architecture as part of its global projection. However, in five companies it was found that corporate relations were not in place from the beginning of the financial operation and acted more as an emergency call, in the sense that the companies did not understand its importance until later. In five companies, this area was not yet considered or a local agency was simply tasked with supporting the integration of the Colombian TNC into the local environment.

CONCLUSIONS

From a methodological point of view, the study of public relations was enriched by a Delphi analysis with academic experts and professionals in the field of the study and by a survey of professionals on the ground in the multilateral companies studied. This combination of instruments showed a parallelism between theory and practice. On the one hand, the panel of experts considered that Anglo-Saxon theories can enrich the public relations strategies of Latin American TNCs, as the continent has lived under the theory of dependency, which does not exempt public relations as a discipline that feeds on the Global North; on the other hand, directors see the process of internationalization of their companies through a hybridization between the centralization of strategies and the decentralization of tactics, giving a central role to corporate reputation as the best strategy for stakeholder relations in the countries where they invest.

This dual perspective presents convergences and divergences in that experts can analyze it with more patience and detail, while companies instrumentalize their relationships with strategic stakeholders on a daily basis, making public relations a subject that is constantly adapted and evaluated through global and regional approaches (Baquerizo-Neira et al., 2024). Therefore, the central objective of the research is efficiently achieved by understanding that, from the Latin American perspective, Colombian *multilaterales* can offer theoretical insights that are consistent with the findings to the extent that it is understood that this type of organization interacts physically and virtually with different audiences outside its own country, resulting in complex, interdependent and interconnected international public relations processes, as well as political changes in countries that can influence the level of investment and trust in TNCs' relationships.

The four proposals of the theoretical framework applied in the second round of the Delphi panel help to theoretically strengthen our South-South relations,

because although they are global visions, they fit the Latin American scenario by prioritizing relations aimed at creating lasting ties with stakeholders and committed to the democratic and transparent scenario. (Adi et al., 2023), one of the biggest trends on our continent.

For both the panel of experts and the dircoms interviewed, the articulation of communication acts as a subsystem of the network that connects the home country with the host countries, so Colombian *multilaterales* understand that in order to achieve financial success, they must be accompanied by adequate strategic public relations planning. For panel members, coordination with stakeholders is paramount, while for dircoms, reputation management is paramount, which is necessary in changing scenarios and with constant political crises that often lead to hostility towards a TNC's behavior on multiple geographic fronts (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Home must be aware of the specificities of transnational stakeholders and take into account certain cultural frameworks in order for the execution of public relations strategies to have the desired impact; therefore, it is important to decentralize and relinquish control to ensure more autonomy. International public relations are of strategic importance as it adapts the corporate culture to a variety of audiences scattered in all the countries where the company invests. Therefore, it is important to develop a communication policy that starts from a management function of the professional in the field of study, who is responsible for building a bridge characterized by a symmetrical dialog between the company management and the stakeholders.

The panelists pointed out that in Latin America, management planning in communication and public relations follows the emergence of audiences that exert increasing pressure on the corporate world (Monteiro Batistella & Marchiori, 2013), therefore the first specific objective is met, suggesting that the expert panel offers its own view of trends in this discipline; however, the dircoms emphasize that the size of the organization determines the strategies and advocate that the management level knows the strategic functions that public relations performs. This was addressed in the theoretical framework and can be confirmed in the third question to directors, who tend to be more tactical without underestimating the importance of central planning.

Relationship strategies create a common value chain between the different subsidiaries of the *multilaterale*, so that information becomes an afterthought but useful tactical measure for the maintenance of good relations, the projection of a knowledge society, the cultural integration of the region and the joint growth of the economies' gross domestic product. For this reason, one of the biggest trends

in the multilateral framework that manages to integrate the visions of experts and directors is based on giving a transnational social identity to international public relations, where the process of adapting a TNC (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019) entails an adaptive fieldwork of organizational culture with high margins of flexibility according to the capabilities of each company and the level of investment in a given country. Communication management is a fundamental element for the success of internationalization.

When companies cross their national borders, they must respond to target groups that are located in a specific environment but have different interests when they are present in two or more different countries. For this reason, it was considered that the role of international public relations in TNCs of Colombian origin focuses on the theoretical adaptation of international public relations of hegemonic countries, in which global audiences must be identified, analyzed and their nuances and interests understood in the Delphi analysis. This is because the happy ending of relational strategies lies in transnationalization, insofar as the image of the company and the group of companies that comprise it is at stake. For the dircoms interviewed, the question of corporate reputation is a central issue, not only for the company's internal communication, but also when it comes to integration and positioning in a country. This is because the success of the investment depends on a positive image, as expressed in the concepts of transnational reputation, which adapt the protection of image and business to the global framework of the company. Although it is at the bottom of the dircoms' ranking, the image of a country can be projected through the foreign investments of its companies, because they become ambassadors in an indirect way, as the historical and economic relations coincide with the perception of the different target groups in the country where the company is located.

Successful business expansion must be accompanied by communication planning that allows building lasting public relations with stakeholders scattered in different countries where the brand, corporate culture and even the image of the home country will be internationalized. The main challenge for international public relations is to combine the essence of a transnational company with the far-reaching technological advances of artificial intelligence and social networks (Thompson, 2020), tools that will enable better decision-making and impact relationships with increasingly engaged and influential stakeholders. Similarly, *multilaterales* are still taking a tactical approach to their subsidiaries, as the dircoms' survey shows. The transformation of organizations in the global arena requires systematic support from digital resources so that the transnational culture supports crisis management, internal communication and organizational culture, creating a theoretical link between traditional public relations and a more modern vision

adapted to the global business world (Macnamara, 2022). This was evident in dircom's survey, which explains that public relations strategies can be very well planned at headquarters, but the guarantee of their success will always be linked to tactical execution, so that the digitization of corporate information becomes an input that supports the landing of the company in a host country from the beginning of its expansion.

The advantages of technological and instrumentalist advances in the media help international public relations in *multilaterales* to adopt an intermediate perspective between the instrumentalization of the media and the strategic objective of the company, allowing a spatio-temporal approach for transnational companies with audiences scattered across different latitudes. This is not a purely top-down vision of the power of media over audiences, but a horizontalization that shares a global message with the totality of host countries and their stakeholders. For the experts of the panel and dircoms, the Anglo-Saxon adoption of strategic public relations management as a whole coincides with the Latin American vision, both tactically, due to the challenges of the digital information society, and in terms of how artificial intelligence will intervene in the human relations of organizations.

A future area of work is to extend this analysis in a comparative perspective between Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Peru, as these are the countries that have developed world-class *multilaterales* companies.

FUNDING

Excellence Scholarships from the Colombian Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation to support high-level training at foreign universities, code: 860, years 2020-2022. Main beneficiary researcher: Andrés Felipe Giraldo Dávila.

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